

NOTABLES AND NATIONALISM: A HISTORY OF  
PALESTINIAN ARAB POLITICS, 1917-1939

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the Palestinian national movement between 1917 and 1939. It focuses on the social structure and economic problems in Palestinian Arab society and how these factors contributed to the political challenges that confronted the national leadership. The Palestinian Arab leaders of this era are remembered today for their unwillingness to accept the terms of the British Mandate. Their position stayed more or less consistent throughout the period under review, as did their opposition to Jewish land purchase and immigration to the region. These were the two major tenets of the Zionist movement and critical objectives of the mandate itself. The continued opposition of the Palestinian leaders and the persistence of the issues they faced did not amount to a static situation. There were various social and economic changes taking place in Palestine. These changes adversely affected the lower classes and weakened the position of the ruling class. As the plight of the Palestinians worsened, the national leaders remained caught in political gridlock that further eroded their position. In addition to these factors, there were outside forces that determined the trajectory of the Palestine mandate and the state of its Arab population. After World War I, a series of externally imposed political constraints were key factors in determining the range of political options available to the Palestinian leadership and the possible sources of national identity. Living under the British Mandate and experiencing the effects of Jewish settlement created a common platform for the development of a unique Palestinian identity, one that set the Palestinians

apart from the other Arab peoples. Even though they coalesced as a distinct national people, political divisions kept the Palestinians from forming the united front that was needed to address the situation.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Ernest Gellner writes that nationalism is “primarily a principle which holds that the national and political unit should be congruent.”<sup>1</sup> Based on this definition, it can be said that the establishment of a nation state is the intersection of national and political interests, or when a people that are bound by a collective national identity come under the political control of a government that embodies that identity. It is rare that political and national units are perfectly congruent and sometimes a people develop a distinct national identity without an accompanying sovereign state that embodies that identity. This has been the case in Palestine, where the indigenous Arab population has come to share a national identity as the Palestinian people, even though it has never been governed by an independent Palestinian government. In fact, the absence of a state has become a defining feature of Palestinian nationalism. This reality has been attributed to the failures of the Palestinian leadership, the policies of the Israeli government, and the general inability of the two sides to arrive at a comprehensive peace agreement in the years since the Six Day War. These are certainly important considerations, but the history of the Palestinian national movement before 1967 is also relevant for understanding the challenges facing the Palestinian people today.

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, New Perspectives on the Past (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 1.

The general history of the Palestine mandate (1920-1948) focuses on a main narrative of mutual enmity between Arabs and Jews and the ultimate futility of British efforts to create a peaceful coexistence for the two peoples. The basic recounting of events is fascinating because there is nothing in world history that is in any way comparable. It is the story of two developing national movements competing for control of one space, one of them living perennially on the land, the other trying to reestablish ties with its ancient homeland.

Much of the historiography characterizes the Arab leadership as factionalized, unwelcoming towards Jewish settlers and uncooperative with the British authorities. This description is generally accurate. By 1939 the Arab situation in Palestine had deteriorated substantially. In that year, the MacDonald White Paper proposed a final settlement consisting essentially of a five year window for Jewish immigration with limits on the number of annual admissions, and an Arab veto on subsequent immigration. It also called for an independent binational state in Palestine within ten years, in which, given the immigration quotas, the Arabs would certainly be the majority.<sup>2</sup> The prospect of majority status in an independent state, and clear and finite limits on immigration were unprecedented British concessions. The Arab leadership rejected the proposal, demanding independence and an end to Jewish immigration. The Arab leaders' refusal to work within the framework of the mandate from its inception through 1939, and indeed to 1948, leads to the logical conclusion that there was a degree of continuity in the Arabs' unwillingness to compromise.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, ed. *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict 4th Ed.* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 64-75.



However, the general consistency of the Arab negotiating line did not represent an unchanging Arab society in Palestine. There were a series of social and economic changes that increased the volatility of the situation facing the Palestinian national leadership. These changes both increased the urgency for a political solution and underscored the true cost of the failure to achieve one. In addition to social and economic changes, there were varying notions of national identity and shifting political possibilities for the future of Palestine and its Arab population. It was not simply a matter of aligning the political and national unit; there were also disagreements over which political and national units were being addressed.

This thesis does not contradict the argument that the Palestinian Arab leaders mismanaged the situation, wasted time by fighting amongst themselves, and failed to act in a concerted and effective manner. Nor does it ignore the fact that the mandate was heavily biased towards Zionism, in theory and in practice. Instead, it will attempt to add context to the prevailing narrative by examining the relationship between the socioeconomic changes in Palestinian society and the political challenges that the Palestinian national movement was facing. The national leaders' response to the challenges was closely linked to the effects these changes had on the Arab population. It is well-established that the Arab leadership struggled to achieve its goals during the mandate. Analyzing the relationship between the political challenges and the socioeconomic changes helps us understand why this was the case.

The first chapter gives an overview of the political, social and economic systems that evolved in Palestine during the latter decades of the Ottoman Empire. It also looks at the period immediately after World War I when there was no clearly defined or widely

accepted Palestinian national identity and society was still largely dominated by family, village and clan loyalties. Among the political elite, there was much support for an Arab government, but considerable ambivalence over whether Palestine should be included in an independent Arab state based in Damascus or administered as its own territory under British rule.

The second chapter examines the ways in which the Arab leadership consolidated its power in the first decade of the mandate. The Arab leaders were mostly from the *a'yan*, the same leaders that had controlled Ottoman Palestine. Lacking an official channel to the British authorities, they vied for power through the Arab Executive and the Supreme Muslim Council. The third chapter addresses the issues of Jewish land purchases and immigration and how these issues related to the changes taking place in Arab society. These changes included the growth of Palestinian cities, the rise of an urban middle class, and the worsening plight of the rural lower class.

The final chapter analyzes how these factors converged and contributed to the demise of the Palestinian national leadership during the Palestinian Revolt of 1936-39. This section discusses the culmination of the themes addressed in the first three chapters; the reframing of the nationalist discourse and the increase in political options that was reminiscent of the post-World War I era; the implosion of the status quo and the institutional support that had protected the traditional elites since the beginning of the mandate; and the rise of the villagers who took a leading role in the rebellion and acted independently of the notable leadership.

## CHAPTER II

### PALESTINIAN SOCIETY BEFORE THE MANDATE

This chapter deals with the evolution of Arab society in Palestine in the years before World War I and during the transition from the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the beginning of the British mandate. Two main groups defined Palestinian Arab society at this time. One was the *a'yan*, the elite class of landowning notables that had dominated Palestine during the late Ottoman era and generally continued to do so under the mandate. A handful of families used their economic power and social standing to maintain the political leadership of and control over the Arabs of Palestine. The other was the *fellahin*, mostly tenant farmers whose economic, political, and social lives revolved around small villages and who were at the bottom of the political patronage networks controlled by the *a'yan*. The fairly loose administrative standards of the Ottomans, the prevalence of family, clan, village and religious affiliations, and the intersecting and overlapping loyalties of the Arabs in Palestine, resulted in a decentralized society that lacked an overarching sense of national identity. Also, among the political elite, there was uncertainty over whether to pursue a Palestinian entity under British protection or support the inclusion of Palestine in a larger and hopefully independent Arab state based in Syria. The different options within Palestine were matched by various external forces, whose involvement created a political climate in which the fate of Palestine and the national and

political preferences of its inhabitants were significantly influenced by agreements between European powers, and to a lesser extent, the influence of Zionist leaders and Arab leaders from outside of Palestine.

### Ottoman Rule

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, what would become mandatory Palestine was a largely agricultural society under the general administration of the Ottoman Empire. By that time social conditions in the region had deteriorated considerably. Bedouin tribes raided *fellahin* farms in attacks that were frequent and difficult to combat. The *fellahin* were often caught in inter-village feuds and confronted with tax-farmers, the unscrupulous tax-collecting profiteers contracted by the Ottoman government. The regime in Istanbul ruled over the region, though its control was shaky at best. It was incapable of delivering the protection that the *fellahin* needed to farm the land successfully, or even to carry on with their lives. Shaykhs, or rural (tribal) chiefs, served the Ottomans as local agents and sometimes as tax-farmers while providing the *fellahin* with some amount of protection.<sup>3</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century Ottoman rulers came to rely less on village shaykhs. A new position of village leader known as the *mukhtar* was created, though this official did not supplant the shaykh as the local client of the Ottoman administration. Instead, this role passed to a rising class of town notables known as the *a'yan*. The shaykhs retained much of their social importance, but the crucial political and economic functions became concentrated in the hands of the *a'yan*. Small peasant

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<sup>3</sup> Joel S. Migdal, *Palestinian Society and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 9-11.

farmers and villagers “came to be dependent, not on leaders whose power extended over only one or several villages, but on these urban leaders, whose power reached out from the cities to whole networks of villages.”<sup>4</sup>

The rise of the *a‘yan* was made possible by the Tanzimat reforms, an ambitious set of administrative laws under which Istanbul sought, with varying degrees of success, to bring the provinces under tighter central control. A particular objective of the Tanzimat reforms was to systemize land ownership and increase revenue from tax collection. Under the 1858 Land Law all grain-producing agricultural properties were to be formally registered and their owners held liable for the agricultural taxes. Many peasant small landholders feared that land registration would result in higher tax burdens and conscription in the Ottoman army. Attempts to evade registration were widespread. Some allowed their land to be registered under the name of a powerful local figure, ceding official title to the land while assuming that they were retaining cultivation rights. Others did not register their land at all. The Ottoman authorities often claimed rights over unregistered lands and sold large tracts of land to urban notables at very low prices.<sup>5</sup> Wealthy individuals living in nearby cities like Beirut also purchased substantial tracts of land. The seized and sold land was still worked by the peasants, but they were not the official owners of the property.

In addition to being economically lucrative, the new situation was politically advantageous for the *a‘yan*. They controlled tax collection and had largely superseded the village shaykhs as the local executors of Ottoman law. The *a‘yan* and the families they represented competed with one another for key administrative posts in Palestine.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 13.

Although power might pass from one family to another, it mostly stayed within the elite, wealthy ranks of society. A *a'yan* gains came at the expense of the *fellahin*, whose success in avoiding Ottoman taxes would later prove costly. They had relinquished legal control of their property and in doing so had become sharecroppers at the mercy of either the local *a'yan* or of non-Palestinian Arabs who owned their land.

Some *fellahin* kept ownership of their land under the *musha'* system, a form of communal land ownership in which each farmer was allotted a parcel of land which was redistributed periodically so that the best parcels were not monopolized. Plots were farmed intensively but constant redistribution tended to discourage more advanced cultivation methods. *Musha'* holdings were generally inadequate for subsistence and many farmers began to take out loans in order to meet their needs. By the early twentieth century, perpetual indebtedness, at interest rates of anywhere from 10 to 50 percent, was a way of life for many *musha'* farmers.<sup>6</sup> Many forfeited their property after defaulting on loans. One estimate shows that by 1923 75 percent of *musha'* holdings had come under the control of absentee landlords living outside the villages.<sup>7</sup> Although this figure was compiled after the Ottoman era, it indicates the longstanding trend of land acquisition by absentee owners, a trend that began during the later Ottoman period.

The fate of the *fellahin* varied in different regions of Palestine, but it suffices to say that by 1914 a large proportion of the rural population of Palestine was in a precarious position. They were dependent on absentee landlords, either the urban *a'yan* or an outside proprietor. Many *fellahin* who still owned land were only able to do so by

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth W. Stein, *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

incurring large debts. The result was a highly inequitable distribution of wealth. Small and middling landholders survived on credit. Farmers who cultivated land belonging to urban notables or other absentee landlords were secure only as long as that land was not sold. In general, the Ottoman reforms resulted in the consolidation of the position of the *a'yan*, and the erosion of that of the *fellahin*. Migdal summarizes the key changes of the middle and late nineteenth century.

Peasants increasingly found the basis of their self-subsistence and autarchic communities slipping from under them....the Ottoman authorities shifted the emphasis of their policies in Palestine. Political alliances were forged with a less localistic, urban-based Palestinian elite. Local councils established as part of the reforms came to be dominated by these urban notables. Preeminent families consolidated their influence, controlling critical municipal offices in the towns and gaining control of huge tracts of land in the countryside.<sup>8</sup>

Other critical social changes took place in the late nineteenth century. In addition to shifts in the balance of power among the indigenous population, there were changes in its social composition. Zionism had formed in late nineteenth century Europe as an ideology that defined the Jews as a people with legitimate national aspirations. According to the Basel Program adopted at the first Zionist congress in 1897, "The aim of Zionism is to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law."<sup>9</sup> European Jews began migrating to Palestine in 1881. Between 1895 and 1903, 10,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine. From 1903 to 1914 another 34,000 arrived, and at the start of World War I the Jewish population totaled roughly 60,000,<sup>10</sup> still a small minority. The

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<sup>8</sup> Migdal, *Palestinian Society and Politics*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Rubin, ed. *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict 4th Ed.*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Justin McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine : Population History and Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 23-24.

Arab population at this time was almost 750,000;<sup>11</sup> but at the very least the Zionist movement had established the demographic foundations of a future Jewish state.

Zionist ambition in the region is a useful reference point for understanding the degree of unity in Arab society in Palestine, and the obstacles the Arab population experienced in its evolution toward a national movement. After the beginning of the mandate in 1920, the Arabs of Palestine would eventually evolve into a more cohesive national movement with shared interests and beliefs. Resistance to Zionist advances, immigration and land purchases was a major factor in the growth of this solidarity. An examination of the initial response to Zionism helps clarify the state of Palestinian nationalism in the formative stages. Essentially, it addresses the question of how and when the Arab population began to think of itself as a singular national entity, which is closely linked to the question of the existence of Palestine as a distinct territorial entity before World War I.

The concept of Palestine as a contiguous and at least partly unified administrative entity predates World War I, Zionism, and the British mandate. Beginning in 1874, the district (*sanjaq*) of Jerusalem, including the subdistricts (*qadhas*) of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Beersheba, Gaza, and Jaffa, was administered directly from Istanbul, separate from other Ottoman territories. Earlier, though only for a short time, it had been part of a province named *Filastin*, which included Nablus, Haifa, and Galilee. Previously, the *sanjaq* of Jerusalem had been administered as part of the province (*wilaya*) of Damascus.<sup>12</sup> Schölch notes that “beneath the fluctuating surface of administrative

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<sup>11</sup> 657,377 Muslims; 81,012 Christians Ibid., 26.

<sup>12</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity : The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 151.



boundaries, an image of the region's coherency, was recognizable, at least after 1830. During the 1870s it took on contours that were clearer. To this extent the Mandate zone was no artificial, colonial creation."<sup>13</sup>

The idea of Palestine also had some recognition among the Arabs living in the region. One scholar notes that "at the end of the Ottoman period the concept of *Filastin* was already widespread among the educated Arab public, denoting either the whole of Palestine or the Jerusalem *sanjaq* alone."<sup>14</sup> For literate Arabs, admittedly a small proportion of the population, the potential problems inherent in Zionist colonization were discussed regularly in two Palestinian newspapers, *al-Karmil*, established in Haifa in 1908, and *Filastin*, established in Jaffa in 1911. The latter wrote of "*the Palestinian nation [al-umma al-filastiniyya]*" and "the danger which threatens it from the Zionist current."<sup>15</sup> This denotes both the presence of a threat and the notion of a distinct Palestinian territory that was being threatened.

On the other hand, the prevalence of this worldview should not be overstated. Arabs in the region derived their primary identification from any number of sources. Muslim Arabs tended to regard themselves as part of a larger community of believers that transcended regional or proto-national identity. The same could be said for Christian Arabs and the small indigenous Jewish population. In a more immediate sense, it was clan, sect, village, or family connections that commanded loyalty and identification.

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander Schölch, *Palestine in Transformation, 1856-1882: Studies in Social, Economic, and Political Development*, trans. William C. Young and Michael C. Gerrity (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1993), 16. Cited in Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity : The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 152. While this seems to be somewhat of an overstatement, it is a useful counter to alternative claims of the entirely artificial foundations of Palestine.

<sup>14</sup> Yehoshua Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974), 8-9. Cited in Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity : The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 152.

<sup>15</sup> Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity : The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 155.

Class difference and social distance meant that the *a'yan* and *fellahin* probably did not regard each other as fellow Palestinians, and the legacy of inter-village warfare provided no basis for unity or common cause among *fellahin* from different villages.

Thus by the onset of World War I, the Arab population of Palestine had some idea of Palestine as a distinct entity and a much more nebulous notion of itself as a Palestinian people. Religion, village, and family connections all competed as sources of identification. Connection to the land was precarious for the *fellahin*. They either did not own the land they worked or often maintained ownership by incurring crippling debt. This contrasts sharply with the burgeoning Zionist movement, which was steadily becoming more cohesive and better-financed in its goal of creating a *yishuv* based on land acquisition and Jewish immigrant labor.

#### Faisal and the Palestinians

The defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I was of course a major turning point in the history of the modern Middle East. Its effect on the formation of Palestinian national movement was no less significant. Although rule from Istanbul had not been especially repressive, the end of four centuries of Ottoman reign fundamentally changed the political paradigm of the Arab population of Palestine. In addition, some of the political developments in the greater Middle East during and immediately after the war were major influences on the direction of Palestinian national movement in the 1920s and 1930s.

Most important were the British dealings in the Middle East. Various British diplomats had made conflicting and apparently irreconcilable assurances to Jewish and

Arab leaders regarding the future of Palestine. In 1915-16, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, exchanged a series of letters with Sharif Husayn of Mecca, ruler of the Hijaz. The Sharif had initially sided with the Ottomans, but he now sought British support for the creation of an 'Arab state' after the war in the event of an Allied victory in exchange for leading an Arab Revolt against the Turks. McMahon, however, was reluctant to commit to specified boundaries. In one of his letters, Husayn asked McMahon to promise British support for "the independence of the Arab countries" in the areas encompassing Greater Syria, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>16</sup> although the text does not name the individual territories specifically. In a subsequent letter McMahon offered nominal acceptance of the idea, but included a series of reservations that would have precluded the possibility of a large Arab state, and possibly even a geographically contiguous one. In addition to reserving Iraq to Britain and emphasizing that Britain was bound to respect French interest in the region, McMahon wrote, in a famously mystifying sentence, that "The districts of Mersina and Alexandretta, and portions of Syria lying to the west of the districts of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo cannot be said to be purely Arab, and must on that account be excepted from the proposed delimitation."<sup>17</sup> Figure 1 shows some of the cities that McMahon cited as the eastern boundary of the region that was to be excluded from the prospective Arab state. Given the vagueness of his wording, it would be difficult to draw a map that definitively marked the excepted territory. Although no Palestinian Arab leaders were involved in the correspondence, the

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<sup>16</sup> Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 7th ed. (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 59,91-92.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

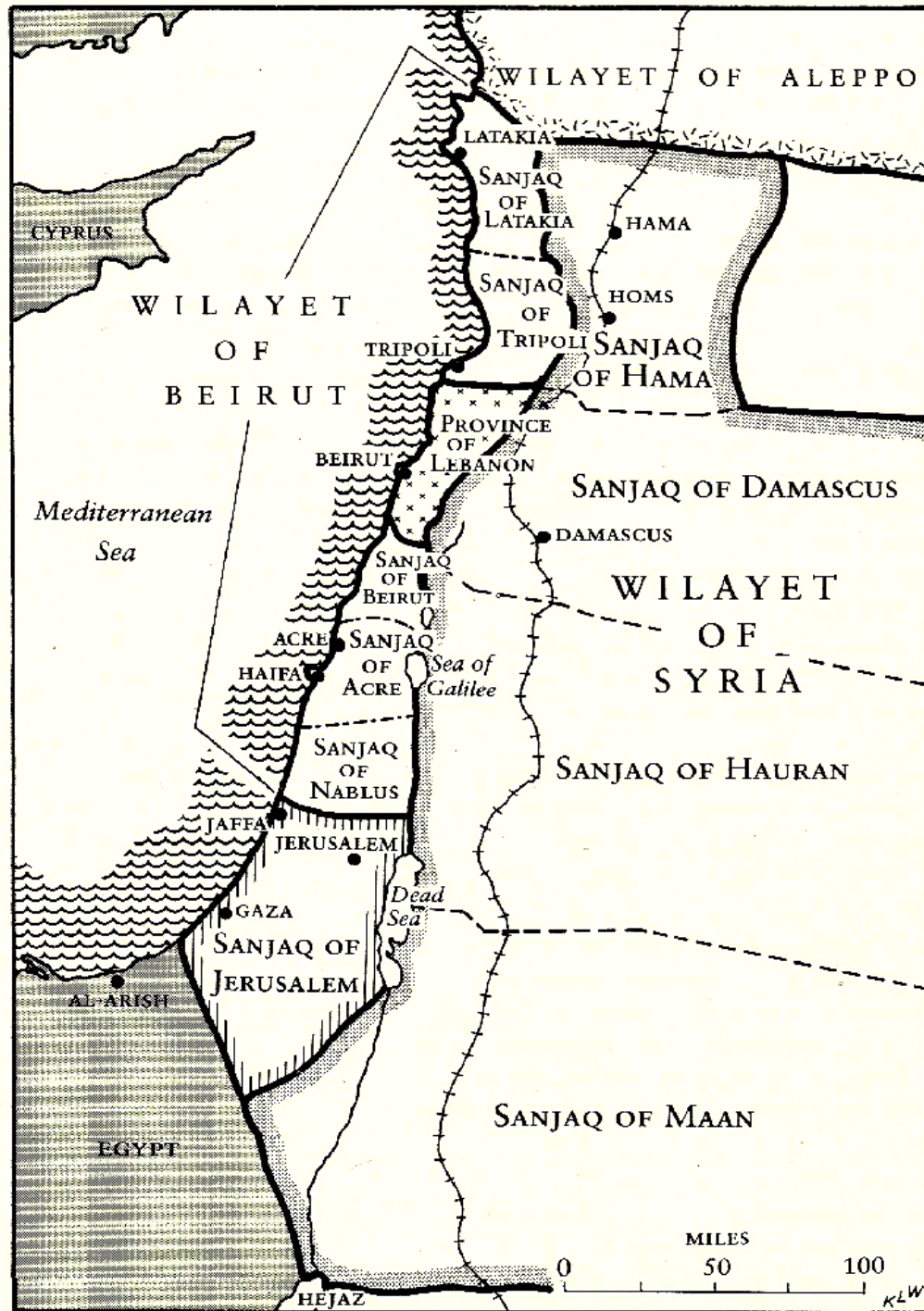


Figure 1. Syria and Palestine, 1915. From *The Land Question In Palestine, 1917-1939* by Kenneth W. Stein. Copyright © 1984 by the University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher. [www.uncpress.unc.edu](http://www.uncpress.unc.edu)

letter from McMahon left the impression that the British were considering the creation of an independent Arab state under Sharif Husayn. These intentions, as expressed by McMahon, were vague and ill-defined, and the British did little to dispel the ambiguity. This was significant because when the war ended these letters provided the basis for the idea that Palestine might be included in an Arab state.

Moreover, it appears the British overestimated the extent of Sharif Husayn's influence or name recognition outside of the Hijaz. He lacked broad support throughout the Middle East and his ability to foment a widespread Arab Revolt, or garner support for unified Arab state, was far more limited than the British realized. At least until the takeover of the Ottoman state by members of the Committees of Union and Progress in 1909, the Arab provinces had generally shown themselves to be amenable to Ottoman rule. Although the notion of a unified Arab state based in Syria would gain some support after World War I, it was not based on any substantial previously existing Arab sentiment for unity and independence under the authority of the Sharif.

Second, in November 1917, the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour had announced in a letter to Lord Rothschild, the head of the British Zionist Organization, the intention of the British government to support the establishment of a 'national home for the Jewish people' in Palestine. It was a nonbinding but written assurance that the Zionist movement badly needed in order to legitimize its goals, and would become a central tenet of British mandate policy. Another important development was the Sykes-Picot Agreement, signed in 1916 between the British and French, which outlined the countries' future designs for the region and their intention to create permanent spheres of influence in the Middle East in the event of an Ottoman defeat.

Arab forces made important contributions to the Allied cause. The Sharif's oldest son Faisal assisted British General Sir Edmund Allenby in the siege of Damascus in the fall of 1918. Faisal's army entered the city in the beginning of October 1918, a few weeks before the Ottoman government surrendered by signing the Armistice of Mudros.

The various factors at work illustrate the new realities facing the Palestinian Arabs. They were suddenly faced with a host of strong outside forces that were intent on determining the future of Palestine. Under the Sykes-Picot agreement, Palestine was to be internationalized, its future the subject of future negotiations between Russia, the Allies, and Sharif Husayn.<sup>18</sup> For the time being, however, it was in British hands; Allenby's army had captured Jerusalem at the end of 1917. In January 1918 President Woodrow Wilson announced his fourteen points, one of which was self-determination. In the same spirit, a joint Anglo-French declaration was issued in early November 1918, stating that the future of the people of Syria and Mesopotamia should be based on their own wishes. This came only days after the Zionist Organization sponsored a parade in Jerusalem to commemorate the first anniversary of the Balfour Declaration.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, there was Faisal, whom Allenby's administration had permitted to establish an Arab government in Damascus under British supervision. This development irritated the French who had expected to control that area under the Sykes-Picot agreement, although they lacked the necessary troops.<sup>20</sup> On January 3, 1919 Faisal concluded an agreement with Chaim Weizmann, head of the World Zionist Organization

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>19</sup> Ann Mosely Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, The Modern Middle East Series V. 11 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 85.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 77. Smith notes that Allenby's interpretation was technically not in violation of the agreement but was more importantly not what the French had anticipated.

(WZO), which recognized the primordial ties between the Jewish and Arab people. Faisal, “representing and acting on behalf of the Arab Kingdom of Hejaz” agreed that “the surest means of working out the consummation of their national aspirations, is through the closest possible collaboration in the development of the Arab State and Palestine.”<sup>21</sup> The agreement included clauses aimed at furthering both Arab and Jewish interests. Faisal was cautious, however, adding a handwritten reservation after signing the document, saying that he would not abide by the agreement if any amendments were made.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of 1918 and at the beginning of 1919, the Palestinian Arabs, including the *a‘yan*, were facing a new and uncertain political structure. The Ottoman regime in Istanbul and the legitimacy it had provided was gone. In these circumstances, one would think that the newly emboldened Zionist enterprise was the biggest issue for the Palestinian Arabs, and it is true that the Zionist movement had a vision for the future of Palestine that certainly posed an imminent threat to the Arab population. Yet in a strictly political sense, Zionism was a comparatively easy issue to confront. Opposition to the growing Jewish colonial presence was natural and widespread among the Arabs of Palestine. Handling the European powers and Faisal required more tact. Until this point, the political power of the *a‘yan* had been based on its role as intermediary between the *fellahin* and the Ottoman authorities. In general, there was no unity *within* the notables, who did not act cooperatively based on mutual class interest. Rather, notable families had tended their own power bases while at the same time enjoying a mutually beneficial

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<sup>21</sup> Rubin, ed. *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict 4th Ed.*, 18-19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. Given that a number of amendments were indeed made, the significance of the document has been somewhat overemphasized.

relationship with Ottoman regime. Now the *a'yan* were suddenly adrift, confronted with a situation that required effective and unified leadership and the organized advocacy of Palestinian Arab interests to counter European, Zionist, and outside Arab interests.

A unified approach never materialized for two main reasons. First, the *a'yan* were divided by family and clan loyalties far more than they were united by any notion of Palestinian nationalism. Consequently, their post-World War I political dealings were mostly directed towards trying to reaffirm the privileges they had enjoyed under the Ottoman Empire. Second, in the year and a half between the end of the war and the confirmation of the British mandate, the notion of an independent Palestinian Arab entity was not universally agreed upon. Options included unification with an independent Greater Syria or a limited British presence in a separate Palestinian entity. The complexity of the issues involved and the obstacles to effective leadership are evident in the political organizations that began to form at the end of 1918.

At the close of World War I Arab political activity in Palestine centered around three organizations. One was the Muslim-Christian Association (*al-Jam'iyat al-Islamiyyah al-Masahiyyah*), which consisted of older urban politicians, *a'yan* who had figured prominently in Ottoman Palestine. The MCA opposed Zionism and the idea of a Jewish national home. It favored Palestinian self-rule through an elected local legislature under the auspices of Greater Syria. The president of the Jerusalem branch, 'Arif Pasha al-Dajani, hailed from one of the most influential Palestinian Muslim families.<sup>23</sup> The various local chapters of the Muslim-Christian Association, "were not mass membership bodies but were composed of religious leaders, property owners, those who held positions

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<sup>23</sup> Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 219.



in the Ottoman administration, and ‘noble’ families of rural origin – in short the *a‘yan* class.”<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the MCAs, there were two other organizations: the Arab Club (*al-Nadi al-Arabi*) and the Literary Society (*al-Muntada al-Adabi*). These groups drew membership from the younger urban elite rather than the older heads of distinguished families.<sup>25</sup> Both organizations advocated union with Syria and strongly rejected Zionism. The Arab Club was less strident in its propaganda and willing to support the British,<sup>26</sup> provided that the British would limit Zionist claims and support Faisal’s rule in Syria. The Literary Society was pro-French, probably because much of its financing came from France. As France positioned itself to take control of Syria in the fall of 1919, the Literary Society grew increasingly critical of Britain and Faisal. At the end of 1919 the Arab Club claimed 500 members, the Literary Society 600.<sup>27</sup> These figures may have been exaggerated and included individuals who held membership in both groups. Even if the numbers are accurate, these organizations combined with the MCA still represented only a small fraction of the Palestinian Arab population. Politics was undoubtedly an elite domain.<sup>28</sup>

A Palestinian Arab Congress organized by the Muslim-Christian Associations was held in Jerusalem in January 1919. The gathering showed some shared vision for the future of Palestine, but also some differences. ‘Arif al-Dajani, who presided over the

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<sup>24</sup> Ted Swedenburg, "The Role of the Palestinian Peasantry in the Great Revolt (1936-1939)," in *Islam, Politics, and Social Movements*, ed. Edmund Burke III and Ira M. Lapidus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 180.

<sup>25</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 75.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>27</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 85.

<sup>28</sup> Lesch notes that of the thirty to forty clubs that formed in Palestine between 1918-1920, only these three “carried any political weight” Ibid., 84.

conference, favored an independent Palestine under British stewardship, while ‘Izzat Darwaza of Nablus, an Arab Club member with ties to Damascus, supported Faisal and the incorporation of Palestine into an Arab federation.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, the Congress resolved that Palestine was “part of Arab Syria” with “national (*qawmiyya*), religious, linguistic, moral, economic, and geographic bonds,” and that, “this district of ours, meaning Palestine, should remain undetached from the independent Arab Syrian Government that is bound by Arab unity, and free from all foreign influence and protection.”<sup>30</sup> Other resolutions accepted British assistance provided that this would “not prejudice in any way its [Palestine’s] independence and Arab unity.”<sup>31</sup> French ambitions in Palestine were rejected. However, there was some dissent on these points. A pro-French minority filed a separate report objecting to criticism of France as did a pro-British faction that objected to the unification of Palestine and Syria.<sup>32</sup>

These resolutions were contradictory. It would be impossible for Palestine to be part of an independent Syrian state free from foreign influence while simultaneously being under British control. Furthermore, although it was a congress of Palestinian Arabs, the idea of political unity with Syria and the notion of shared national origins had tremendous influence, and there is evidence that its strength was at least equal to that of Palestinian nationalism.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>30</sup> Muhammad Y. Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 181-82.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>32</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 88.

A report by J.N. Camp, a British intelligence officer based in Jerusalem, estimated that the congress was comprised of eleven Palestinian nationalists, twelve Arab nationalists (pro-Syrian unification), two French sympathizers, and two more that tentatively favored union with Syria.<sup>33</sup> Another analysis of the report claims that Camp counted twelve pro-British, twelve pan-Arabists, and two pro-French.<sup>34</sup> The pan-Arab bloc united with the pro-French delegates to support Syrian unity, but suspicion of French ambitions in Syria led to cooperation between the pan-Arabists and the pro-British/Palestinian nationalist faction in passing the anti-French resolution. The same coalition was also united in recommending British assistance for Palestine.<sup>35</sup> For the Arab nationalists, support for an invitation to the British was anathema to their designs for an independent united Syria, but was a political maneuver to safeguard them against the French. These shifting alliances raise two questions. First, was there an inherent contradiction in the delegates who favored both British control and Palestinian autonomy? Could they be pro-British Palestinian nationalists? Second, what was the basis for unity with Syria and what did pro-Syrian delegates stand to gain from their support of this option?

In the first case, those who favored British intervention were mostly the older established leaders of families such as 'Arif al-Dajani, who had led the conference, and Isma'il al-Husayni, who had not participated but whose family was prominent in Jerusalem. A separate administration in Palestine would greatly benefit the Jerusalem notables even if, indeed particularly if, it was run by the British, as they would be the

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<sup>33</sup> Camp's report listed two pro-Syrian delegates with a question mark. Muslih lists all twenty-seven by name, district and political preference. Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, 180.

<sup>34</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 81.

<sup>35</sup> Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, 181.

natural choice to fill administrative posts.<sup>36</sup> This partially explains the pro-British leanings of the MCA that the *a'yan* controlled. They were eager to preserve their position as the local aristocracy – the role they had played under the Ottomans - and cooperation with the British seemed the best way to secure this objective.<sup>37</sup> Britain's support for Zionism was not overlooked, but it was outweighed by the notables' fear of losing their power to a unified Arab government in Damascus.

It should also be noted that the notables made no attempt to include any of the *fellahin* in the formation of a new Palestinian political structure. Classifying twelve representatives as Palestinian nationalists is true in a general sense, but this nationalism was not a broadly based ideological movement; it was a means of preserving the autonomy of local elites. Their desire for British support combined with the separation of Palestine from Syria seemed to be the best strategy to maintain their positions.

If the *a'yan* were at least somewhat prepared to accept British rule, the question remains as to why the resolution also embraced Syria. This question itself has two separate parts. One concerns the ideological basis for the unity of Palestine and Syria, i.e. the “national (*qawmiyya*), religious, linguistic, moral, economic, and geographic bonds” stated in the first resolution. There is some truth in this statement. The indigenous populations of Palestine and Syria did share a number of social, linguistic, and cultural norms stemming from the spread of the Arabic language and the Islamic faith after the death of the Prophet Muhammad and the conquests in the seventh century. The two territories were contiguous with one another and formed the greater part of the geographical entity known as Greater Syria. In fact, during the Ottoman Empire many of

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<sup>36</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 83-84.

<sup>37</sup> Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, 160.

the *sanjaqs* in what was to be the Palestine Mandate were included in the *wilaya* of Greater Syria based in Damascus.<sup>38</sup> Yet the existence of common cultural traits and historical experiences among Arab peoples across the Middle East does not give ideological, let alone objective, coherence to the belief - one which was gaining momentum in the Palestinian and Syrian political circles - that the Arab people constituted a natural single political community. As Hourani wrote, "That those who speak Arabic form a 'nation', and that this nation should be independent and united, are beliefs which only became articulate and acquired political strength during the present century."<sup>39</sup> Even if it was not intellectually sound, the growing sentiment of Arab nationalism was a persistent and sometimes dominant ideological current in Middle Eastern political thought throughout much of the twentieth century. In this instance, it is a useful guideline for understanding the first part of the question regarding the general belief systems linking Palestine to Syria.

The other part revolves around the more immediate political issues of Palestinian support for incorporation into Syria. The option of Syrian unification had strong support at the Jerusalem Congress and this idea became even more popular between January 1919 and July 1920. The first General Syrian Congress was held at the Arab Club in Damascus in July 1919. The members of the Congress presented a memorandum to the King-Crane Commission, which had been formed by President Wilson to determine the future of Palestine. It praised Wilson's "noble principles," requested future economic and technical assistance from America, with Great Britain as back-up should America refuse. The

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<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 260.

memo unequivocally rejected French claims to Syria and Zionist ambitions in Palestine. It also praised Faisal, called for a constitutional monarchy under his auspices and asked that there “be no separation of the southern part of Syria, known as Palestine...from the Syrian country.”<sup>40</sup> The newspaper *Suriyya al-Janubiyya* (Southern Syria) began publication in September 1919 and became very influential. It was associated with the Arab Club in Jerusalem and its incisive articles championed the Arab nationalist cause and unification with Syria.<sup>41</sup>

Even the pro-Palestinian Jerusalem MCA jumped on the bandwagon. Although the Jerusalem notables were cautious about handing over their power to Damascus, they nonetheless were hedging their support for British protection with reverence for Faisal, who, at least for the time being, was the most important political figure in the Arab world. On 11 March 1919 the Jerusalem MCA sent Faisal a copy of its decision a month earlier “to authorize Your Excellency to represent Palestine and defend it at the Peace Conference, within the limits of the previous resolutions and the one mentioned above”.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, there was no obvious alternative to Faisal. The British military administration did not allow the Jerusalem Congress to publish or disseminate its resolutions or send a delegation to the Paris peace conference.<sup>43</sup>

The problem was that the path to pan-Syrian unity and Arab independence ran through Faisal, who was a less than ideal advocate for the Palestinian cause. On the one hand, there was his agreement with Weizmann, although, as has been noted, this was in fact made null and void by the reservations that Faisal himself had expressed.

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<sup>40</sup> Rubin, ed. *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict 4th Ed.*, 32-33.

<sup>41</sup> Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity : The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 162.

<sup>42</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 85-86.

<sup>43</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 88.

Nevertheless, he had not consulted any Palestinian Arab leaders in making the deal. At the Versailles Peace Conference in August 1919, he made no claim that Palestine was part of Syria and at times seemed to favor a Jewish national home in the region.<sup>44</sup> If Faisal did indeed favor the idea, his vision of such a home was probably not as far reaching as the one which subsequently developed, and it should be noted that at their first meeting in June 1918, Weizmann had reassured Faisal that the Jews aimed to colonize Palestine under the British, without setting up a government or “encroaching on legitimate interests.”<sup>45</sup>

In November 1919 a group of pro-Syrian pan-Arab supporters met in Haifa and formed a committee which maintained contact with the Palestine Club in Damascus.<sup>46</sup> A Second Syrian Congress met on 8 March 1920 and reiterated many of the recommendations of the first Congress, including independence under Faisal. However, there were also signs that patience with Faisal was growing short when ‘Izzat Darwaza expressed disapproval of the former’s use of Palestine as a bargaining chip.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, the situation on the ground was becoming tense. On 27 February 1920 Major-General Louis Bols issued a proclamation of Britain’s intent to carry out the Balfour declaration. In the ensuing protests, 1500 Arabs gathered in Jerusalem and 2000 in Jaffa, with the Arab Club and Literary Society as key organizing forces. MCA representatives met with the British authorities to deliver petitions on behalf of the people.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 78.

<sup>46</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 89.

<sup>47</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 89.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

The Arab Club and the Literary Society organized celebrations to coincide with the annual Nabi Musa (Prophet Moses) festival that was to be held in April. Leading Arab figures attended the festival, including ‘Arif al-Dajani, president of the Jerusalem MCA, Musa Kazim al-Husayni, mayor of Jerusalem, Ya‘qub Farraj, head of the Greek-Orthodox community in Jerusalem and two leading members of the Arab Club in Damascus.<sup>49</sup> Also in attendance was Musa Kazim’s younger cousin, al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni.

The Nabi Musa festival was not a tranquil affair. There were attacks on Jewish passers-by and storeowners, and some of the speeches given were violently opposed to Jewish settlement.<sup>50</sup> Hajj Amin al-Husayni excited the crowd by holding up a picture of Faisal, proclaiming, “This is your King!”<sup>51</sup> Musa Kazim al-Husayni also spoke, as did the editor of *Suriyya al-Janubiyya*, ‘Arif al-‘Arif. Correspondence between British officials noted that “there is evident determination on their part [the Arabs] to support their words with actions.”<sup>52</sup>

The fallout from Nabi Musa was rapid. With a warrant out for his arrest, Hajj Amin al-Husayni fled to Transjordan and then to Damascus. ‘Arif al-‘Arif was arrested but also fled across the river when he was released on bail. Both men were sentenced to ten years *in absentia*. Ronald Storrs, the British governor in Jerusalem, dismissed Musa

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, Revised ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 17.

<sup>52</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 97.



Kazim al-Husayni for his role in the demonstrations<sup>53</sup> and *Suriyya al-Janubiyya* was closed permanently by the British authorities.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the backlash inside Palestine, the dream of Arab independence soon crumbled with the inauguration of the mandates. The mandate system partitioned the former Ottoman provinces into semiautonomous territories to be governed by a European power until they were deemed fit for self-government. The system had a dual appeal. It allowed the victorious Allied powers, Britain and France, to retain substantial influence over the region, while simultaneously providing a clear orientation toward eventual independence. This satisfied the security concerns of the Allies while also yielding to a key concept of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, self-determination. Iraq and Palestine (with Transjordan) were awarded to the British,<sup>55</sup> while Syria and Lebanon were assigned to the French. Sir Herbert Samuel became the first High Commissioner of Palestine on 1 July 1920, marking the shift from military to civilian government. Less than three weeks later Faisal's government in Damascus fell to the French army and he fled the country, though he would later return to the fray, serving as the King of Iraq.

The demise of the Southern Syria idea was both a blessing and a curse for the Arabs of Palestine. On the one hand, it gave the fledgling Palestinian movement a much-needed dose of reality. Britain and France had never intended to create a large unified Arab state and for the Palestinian Arabs to pin their hopes on such an outcome was wishful thinking to say the least. Faisal probably did not grasp the scale of Zionist

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<sup>53</sup> Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity : The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 167.

<sup>55</sup> The mandates were designated at a conference at San Remo in April 1920 but they were not ratified by the League of Nations until 1922. Meanwhile, Britain had created a separate regime in the land west of the Jordan River. Transjordan was established in 1921 and was governed separately for the duration of the mandate period.

ambitions; if he had, he would perhaps not have signed a deal with Weizmann. Still, he was far removed from the local leadership, and therefore ill-suited to speak on behalf of the Arabs of Palestine. The *a'yan* of Palestine supported Faisal mostly because he was the main Arab representative to the Europeans, but his viability as ruler was a mirage. His government in Damascus had lasted less than two years and done nothing to advance the Palestinian cause. If the upside of Faisal's abdication was that it relocated the advocacy of Palestinian Arab interests within local borders, the downside was that the local leadership was rife with internal division. However briefly, the possibility of union with Syria had provided a unifying theme for a fractured decentralized society that was still based almost completely on clan and family ties. In the following decade, the *a'yan* would compete for power through new religious and political organizations in Palestine, while making little progress in lobbying the British government for limits on Zionist initiatives.

### Which Imagined Community?

Less than three years had passed between Allenby's capture of Jerusalem and the beginning of the British mandate. In terms of the social hierarchy Palestine had changed very little. The *a'yan* were still the dominant social class and the *fellahin* remained connected to the villages and land that the *a'yan* controlled. For most Arabs in Palestine, the end of Ottoman rule had relatively little direct impact on their daily lives. Yet, there were also a series of changes that would drastically affect the fate of the Arab community in Palestine over the next twenty years.

The demise of the Ottoman Empire could not have been regarded as a foregone conclusion. In 1910, for instance, it would have been difficult to predict the Ottoman decision to side with the Central Powers in World War I. The empire was weak compared to the European powers and may have eventually disintegrated on its own, but the fact that it was toppled by the Allied forces with imperial ambitions created a scenario where the future of the Arab provinces became an item on the European agenda. The *a'yan* were confronted with two European powers, Britain and France, which possessed the strategy and resources to influence the future of Palestine, and it was mostly the Allies that shaped the political options available to the Arab leaders in Palestine.

If nationalism is matter of aligning political and national units, the situation in Palestine between late 1917 and the middle of 1920 raised the question of which political and national units were being considered. There was ambiguity on this point for various reasons. McMahon's letters gave Sharif Husayn the impression that the British were seriously considering an Arab state, even though McMahon was reluctant to stipulate clear parameters. Allowing Faisal to establish a government in Damascus and including him at the Paris peace negotiations further perpetuated the hope of some kind of unified Arab state. These decisions, as well as nominal support for President Wilson's idea of self-determination, created a political environment that encouraged Palestinian support for Faisal. This support was expressed in the resolutions of the two General Syrian Congresses, by the Arab Club and Literary Society, and to a lesser degree by the MCA.

This is not to say that Palestinian support for the Faisal-led pan-Arab option was solely a product of externally imposed constraints. At this stage nationalism was still a new and amorphous concept in the Middle East. The notions of Palestine as a specific

territory and its Arab inhabitants as specifically Palestinian had some recognition among the more educated strata of society, but there was certainly no unanimity on these points. Both pan-Arabism and Palestinian nationalism were recent inventions and in this sense the Jerusalem Congress' recognition of the "national (*qawmiyya*), religious, linguistic, moral, economic and geographic bonds" between Palestine and Syria was perfectly legitimate. At this juncture, an expression of pan-Arab identity may have been politically expedient, but the same could be said of the *a'yan* support for a Palestinian entity. The MCA favored an independent Palestine under British stewardship. This desire to separate Palestine from Syria indicates that, for many of the *a'yan*, accepting British rule in order to preserve their local power bases was an acceptable, or even preferable, alternative to handing over that power to Damascus, even if it meant sacrificing Arab unity and a fully independent state.

To summarize, the ideas of Palestinian nationalism and pan-Arabism were two sources of national identity that enjoyed comparable popularity in the elite political circles of Palestine (i.e. the Arab Club, Literary Society, MCA) at the end of World War I. As sentiments that advocated particular national units, each had political correlates. For the 'pan-Arabists' there was the real, albeit ill-fated, possibility of an Arab state under Faisal. The ideology of Palestinian nationalism was also grounded in the political realities of the day; the *a'yan* endorsed British rule in an effort to ensure the continuity of the elite position that they had held under the Ottomans. The second option ultimately prevailed and thus provided the political and administrative platform for the growth of the Palestinian national movement and Palestinian collective identity.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BRITISH MANDATE FOR PALESTINE

The British Mandate for Palestine began in 1920 and with it a new stage in the formation of the Palestinian national movement. Under the mandate, Palestine was administered a single territory for nearly three decades. The first decade was marked by a constant rivalry between two Jerusalem families, the Husaynis and Nashashibis, who sought to consolidate their power in the new political structure. During the 1920s the Husaynis gained control of the Arab Executive, the leading Arab political committee, and the Supreme Muslim Council, the main religious organization. The Nashashibis, who were less socially prominent and lacked the religious prestige of the Husaynis, formed an opposition movement based on a coalition of Husayni enemies that resented the dominance of a single family. During this time the elite families tried to enhance their power relative to one another, and also gain or maintain favor with the British authorities. An Arab representative body was never established, depriving the Arab population of an official channel for lobbying the British. The British authorities, however, were a key factor in the power struggle between the leading Arab families, as favor with the British was in itself an important measure of power. Although generally divided and lacking in cooperation, Palestinian Arab political culture did take on some semblance of a national

movement during this stage in a way that distinguished it from the situations in other Arab countries.

### The Arab Executive

Family rivalries surfaced almost immediately after the mandate began, particularly when Governor Storrs appointed Raghib Bey al-Nashashibi to replace Musa Kazim al-Husayni as mayor of Jerusalem. The Literary Society and the Arab Club devolved into little more than proxies for the Husaynis and Nashashibis. Some Husayni supporters from the Arab Club joined the Literary Society and began challenging the Nashashibi leadership. Both organizations went into decline and were defunct after 1923.<sup>56</sup>

This growing schism between the families came at a time when unity was badly needed, as the Palestinians were already operating at a disadvantage. The text of the mandate reiterated British support for Zionism as set out in the Balfour Declaration, and numerous provisions in the document expressed support for Jewish immigration and settlement. There was also a stipulation for the creation of a Jewish agency to assist in the establishment of the national home. On the other hand, references to the Palestinian Arab population are vague. Like the Balfour Declaration, the mandate document contained a statement calling for the safeguarding of “the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”<sup>57</sup> but it made no direct reference to the Arabs, and there

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<sup>56</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 100-01, 07. Family control of these organizations did not extend outside Jerusalem. This phenomenon was not insignificant, since the role of Jerusalem increased after the fall of Istanbul. See Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 84.

<sup>57</sup> Rubin, ed. *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict 4th Ed.*, 34.

was no provision for an Arab agency to match the “appropriate Jewish agency” prescribed in article four.<sup>58</sup>

The Muslim Christian Association called for a new conference in December 1920. It was the Third Arab Congress, but it was noticeably different from the first two Syrian Congresses. The attendees were exclusively Palestinian and the conference was held in Haifa rather than Damascus. Initially known as the central committee, the Arab Executive (AE) was established as a nine member executive committee, consisting of seven Muslims and two Christians. Musa Kazim al-Husayni was elected president and ‘Arif al-Dajani vice president. The nine members were predictably men from respected landowning families. The two Christian representatives were merchants.<sup>59</sup>

The platform at Haifa had six parts: recognition of Palestine as a distinct political entity; a complete rejection of Zionist claims to Palestine; a declaration of loyalty to a Palestinian Arab entity that trumped other loyalties (religion, region, clan); a request to the new administration to stop Jewish purchase of state or Arab land; a halt to Jewish immigration; and the recognition of the AE as the representative of the Arabs vis-à-vis the British.<sup>60</sup> The Haifa platform clearly acknowledges the new paradigm created by the mandate. Palestine was now recognized as a territory of its own and national solidarity was declared within its boundaries. This was a departure from the resolutions of the January 1919 Congress held in Jerusalem which had stressed the Syrian connection. In addition, representation before the British, and Jewish immigration and land purchase were highlighted as important national issues.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>59</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 90-91.

<sup>60</sup> Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, *Palestinians : The Making of a People* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 81-82.

Palestinian Congresses were held annually from 1921-1923 with the size of the AE increasing each year. The term 'Southern Syria' fell into disuse, and by the Sixth Congress in Jaffa in 1923 it was completely absent from the proceedings.<sup>61</sup> The AE relied heavily on local MCA branches for its organizational needs, and for a time it had a reasonably functioning infrastructure with the coordination of various activities between local chapters and the secretary in Jerusalem. In 1923 three committees, each consisting of eight men, were designated for administration, economics and political affairs.<sup>62</sup> On the international front, the AE sent delegations to Britain, Switzerland, Turkey, and Egypt to raise awareness of the Palestinian cause. In the early 1920s the Executive reported on its progress to the annual congresses, which gathered the regional MCA representatives.<sup>63</sup> In addition to local MCAs and annual congresses, Jamal al-Husayni served as secretary and was a third source of support for the AE. As the 1920s continued the AE found its base of support crumbling, and between 1924 and 1928 the MCA was beset by internal divisions. After the sixth congress in June 1923 no more were convened until the summer of 1928. Jamal's resignation in 1927 further weakened the organization.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout the 1920s the Arab Executive faced a predicament. It was controlled by the heads of Jerusalem-based families like Musa Kazim al-Husayni – *a'yan* and other elites that had acted as local supporters of the Ottoman administration. Through the MCA these elites had lobbied for Palestinian autonomy under British protection while rejecting Zionist claims to Palestine. Under the mandate they had little autonomy, partly because the mandate did not designate an Arab agency similar to the Jewish agency. The Arab

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<sup>61</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 111.

<sup>62</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 94.

<sup>63</sup> J.C. Hurewitz, *The Struggle for Palestine* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 58.

<sup>64</sup> Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 225.



Executive was not officially recognized by the British, although there were talks of incorporating the Arab leadership into the Palestine government.

In 1922 High Commissioner Samuel made proposals for the creation of a twenty-three member legislative body that would be composed of eleven government officials (the high commissioner and ten others) with the remaining ten selected by the government in accordance with the sectarian distribution of the population, which, at the time, would have meant eight Muslims, two Christians and two Jews. Both Muslims and Christians rejected this proposal through an AE-sponsored boycott of the elections. The AE protested because it would not be allowed to discuss the issue of British commitment to Zionism. Samuel later proposed the creation of an Arab agency whose members he would select, but it was rejected for the same reason; it would be responsible only for Arab affairs, not British-Zionist initiatives.<sup>65</sup>

The AE made its own proposal for a legislative council in 1926, calling for a bicameral legislature. It would have an upper house composed of both nominated members and elected delegates, and a lower house elected by proportional representation. The lower house would have the power to introduce legislation in areas like finance and immigration and question mandate policy. A British counterproposal reaffirmed the importance of the Balfour Declaration and accepted the idea of a lower house with proportional representation, but only if its power was very limited.<sup>66</sup>

For the AE, cooperation with the mandatory government was tantamount to recognition of the Balfour Declaration and the legitimation of Zionism. Arab leaders were interested in participating only if they could petition against Zionist initiatives.

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<sup>65</sup> Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 111-12.

<sup>66</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 188-89.

Conversely, the British authorities could not contemplate the creation of an autonomous Arab legislative body, as they knew very well that Arab resentment for Zionism would be an impediment to Britain's commitment to a Jewish national home.

The best the British colonial government could do was to issue periodic statements which attempted to mollify Arab hostility to Zionism, and assert British support for limits on the extent of the Jewish national home. But these occasional reassurances did little to improve British-Arab relations, since Zionist leaders were adamant about purchasing land and increasing immigration and generally unwilling to accept any limits in these areas. The AE was hostile to the basic principle of Zionism, making any British appeasement of the Arabs virtually impossible.

Some Arab leaders were willing to work with the British. The Nashashibi family and its disciples had been largely excluded from the AE, which had come increasingly under the control of the Husayni clan. Resentment over Husayni control of the AE crystallized into the formation of the Palestine Arab National Party (*al-Hizb al-Watani al-Arabi al-Filastani*), in November 1923. Among the organizers were 'Arif al-Dajani, who had resigned from the AE, Raghib al-Nashashibi, and his nephew Fakhri. This contingent of opposition (*mu'aradah*) leaders aimed to upstage the AE and its Husayni loyalists (*majlisiyyah*) by presenting itself as a more moderate political group that was amenable to working with the British. Raghib's position as mayor precluded his active participation and 'Arif al-Dajani lost his bid for the presidency of the new party to a more extreme candidate.<sup>67</sup> Although the *mu'aradah* had its own internal divisions, the declining AE could not ignore the opposition. The National Party made significant gains in the 1927

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

municipal elections. At the seventh congress in 1928, the opposition figured prominently in a new and enlarged Executive of 48 members. Musa Kazim al-Husayni was president, but the two vice presidents, Tawfiq al-Hajj ‘Abdallah and Ya‘qub al-Farraj were loyal to the opposition. Of the three secretaries only Jamal al-Husayni belonged to the *majlisiyyah*.<sup>68</sup>

The strength of the AE was limited because it was not inclusive of all factions, and its efficacy was limited because it had no official channel to the mandate government. The AE was not a success, but it was noteworthy in the history of Palestinian nationalism. As the first centralized Palestinian Arab political organization of the mandate era it had a distinctly Palestinian character, and whatever pan-Arab sentiment remained had very little influence on its operations. There was no British intervention in the politics of the AE. This was small consolation for its lack of access to the British government, but it meant that a natural balance of power was able to emerge and clarify the relative strength of the different factions. It was natural in the sense that the outcome of any internal power struggles was not influenced by the actions of the mandate government. Zionist leaders did occasionally bribe some Arabs in an attempt to soften the anti-Zionist position of the organization, though this had no demonstrable effect on the distribution of power within the AE or its rhetoric, which remained firmly against Zionism. Above all, its internal feuds reflected the extent to which Palestinian Arab society was still dominated by village, clan, or family association. This continuing trend would prove costly in the 1930s when the need for concerted Arab action became more urgent.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 101.

### The Supreme Muslim Council

Although the Arab Executive was the leading political body in the 1920s and early 1930s, it was arguably second in importance to the Supreme Muslim Council (SMC), the other pillar of Husayni dominance over Palestinian Arab society during the mandate. The creation of the council and the rise of its leader, al-Hajj al-Amin al-Husayni, are integral to understanding how the elites consolidated power in the 1920s and how the fundamental contradictions of that power were exposed in the years leading up to the Palestinian Arab Revolt.

Under Ottoman rule, the office of *mufti* of Jerusalem had not been particularly important, although the degree to which British understood this is not clear. The mufti was basically a religious notable from a prominent local family that was subordinate to the *Shaykh al-Islam* in Istanbul. As a local religious official, he issued legal opinions (*fatwas*) and provided consultation on legal and spiritual matters. The situation changed considerably with the inauguration of British rule. The epicenter of secular and religious authority had been Istanbul. Secular power had passed to the British, over the heads of the Arab Executive. The religious realm was a different matter. The British colonial government was clearly in no position to exercise spiritual authority over an Arab population which was overwhelmingly Muslim.

When the British assumed control in Palestine, Kamil al-Husayni was mufti of Jerusalem, a position in which he had succeeded his father Tahir in 1908.<sup>69</sup> Unlike his cousin, Musa Kazim, and his younger brother, Hajj Amin, Kamil had kept in good favor with the British authorities. He used the pulpit of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem to

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<sup>69</sup> Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, 8.

make public appeals for calm after the Nabi Musa riots.<sup>70</sup> Also noteworthy was his relatively moderate attitude toward Zionism.<sup>71</sup> British authorities rewarded his cooperation by appointing him head of the Central Waqf Council and president of the Jerusalem Shari'a court of appeal. The former position granted him control of the religious finances of Palestine. The latter had been held by the *qadi*, or religious judge, but was now combined under Kamil's control. Furthermore, the British elevated Kamil to the role of "Grand Mufti" (*al-Mufti al-Akbar*), a title that had not existed previously.<sup>72</sup>

Kamil did not enjoy his new powers for very long. He became ill and died in March 1921. His death created a void where there had been a pro-British Arab leader, and the task of choosing a replacement fell on Herbert Samuel. The High Commissioner was to pick a new mufti from the three candidates who received the most votes from a college of electors consisting of local religious officials. One of the four candidates under consideration was al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, who had returned to Palestine following a pardon from Samuel in August 1920.

Only twenty-six at the time, Hajj Amin was already a controversial character and one that incorporated all the contradictions of the nascent Palestinian movement. He was part of a new generation, serving as president of the Arab Club and penning articles for *Suriyya al-Janubiyya*. Yet he was also the son of an old elite family; his father and grandfather had filled the office of mufti, and of the thirteen Jerusalem mayors since 1864, six had been Husaynis.<sup>73</sup> He was a native of Palestine but had rallied for union with

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<sup>70</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 187.

<sup>71</sup> According to Norman Bentwich, Kamil even participated in a groundbreaking ceremony at Hebrew University in 1918. Norman De Mattos Bentwich and Helen Bentwich, *Mandate Memories, 1918-1948* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 189.

<sup>72</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 187-88.

<sup>73</sup> Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 220.

Syria. He had fought briefly with the Ottoman army before joining Faisal's army as it fought with the British against the Turks. While working as a recruiting officer for Faisal one report described him as "very pro-British."<sup>74</sup> This assessment stood in stark contrast to his incendiary role in the 1920 Nabi Musa riots and his strong anti-Zionist sentiments.

The appointment of a new mufti was a delicate issue for Samuel. It gave him the opportunity to ensure local autonomy over Muslim religious affairs, a realm in which the British were decidedly out of their element. Hajj Amin's defiance and subsequent exile had angered the British authorities, but also had won him popular support as a symbol of national resistance. The High Commissioner was Jewish and a dedicated Zionist, so Hajj Amin's rhetoric was a cause for concern. However, Samuel's support for a Jewish national home was tempered by his desire for effective governance, his acknowledgement of British responsibility for the indigenous Arab population, and his desire, as much as possible, to act independently of Zionist pressure.<sup>75</sup> Thus the appointment of a new mufti was an important issue for Samuel. In Hajj Amin, he hoped for a member of the Arab elite with popular credibility who, much like Kamil, would be amenable to British rule.

On the eve of the election Samuel was convinced that Hajj Amin was the man for the job. In a memorandum dated April 11, 1921, the day before the election, Samuel recounted his meeting with Hajj Amin.

I saw Hajj Amin Husseini on Friday and discussed with him at considerable length the political situation and the question of his appointment to the office of grand Mufti....he declared his earnest desire to cooperate with the Government and his belief in the good intentions of the British Government towards the Arabs.

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<sup>74</sup> Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, 12.

<sup>75</sup> According to Mattar, Samuel's pardon of Hajj Amin in August 1920 may have stemmed from the High Commissioner's desire for the British to be more even-handed. In his first year in office he wrote that he was "not commissioned by Zionists but in the name of the King." He also criticized Zionists "who forget or ignore the present inhabitants of Palestine," *Ibid.*, 20.

He gave assurances that the influence of his family and himself would be devoted to maintaining tranquility in Jerusalem and he felt sure that no disturbances need be feared this year.<sup>76</sup>

Still, Hajj Amin's candidacy faced other obstacles. He was opposed by the Nashashibis and the Jarallahs, another prominent Jerusalem family, and as well as by members of his own family who considered him ill-prepared to take on such an important role. This was a legitimate concern. His opponents - Musa al-Budairi, Husam al-Din Jarallah, Khalil al-Khalidi – were three shaykhs with far greater religious education. The election results came back with Hajj Amin in fourth and, for the moment, he appeared out of the running. The Husaynis quickly protested, claiming the election was invalid on technical grounds. Petitions with hundreds of signatures flooded the government offices. Hajj Amin's supporters included *'ulama*, notables, and even some Christians.<sup>77</sup>

To resolve the dilemma British authorities enlisted the help of Raghib al-Nashashibi and 'Ali Jarallah, a shari'a court judge and brother of the candidate in first place. Together they persuaded Husam Jarallah to withdraw from the list, restoring Hajj Amin's eligibility as the third of three candidates. In May 1921 Samuel appointed Hajj Amin as Mufti of Jerusalem, though there was no official letter or announcement.<sup>78</sup> Hajj Amin's prestige was further enhanced when he won the presidency of the Supreme Muslim Council (SMC). Two representatives from Jerusalem were elected to the council, along with one from Acre and one from Nablus. His new authority was wide-ranging. He

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<sup>76</sup> Zvi Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, ed. Shmuel Himelstein, trans. David Harvey (London: Frank Cass, 1993), 9.

<sup>77</sup> Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, 25.

<sup>78</sup> Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, 10. The low profile of the official appointment, and the fact that Hajj Amin was initially only named mufti rather than Grand Mufti, may have reflected Samuel's lingering doubts over his choice. He also may have been trying to avoid inciting further controversy over the nomination.

had control over the shari'a courts, including the appointment of court officials, of religious schools, orphanages and waqf funds.

As president of the SMC, he renovated and improved libraries, mosques, schools and health and welfare clinics. He imported 50,000 trees for planting on waqf land.<sup>79</sup> He also undertook a high-profile initiative to begin the restoration and repair of the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque, a campaign that included fundraising trips to other Arab states.<sup>80</sup> However, Hajj Amin's leadership was not beneficial for all. The majority of funding flowed to the Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Nablus districts, while Hebron and Haifa-Acre were neglected. Religious officials were hired or dismissed according to their loyalty to Hajj Amin, and family members were given preferential treatment.<sup>81</sup>

The Supreme Muslim Council and the Arab Executive were the two centers of power for the Arab elites in the 1920s and 1930s. Both were controlled by the Husaynis, the AE by the older Musa Kazim, the SMC by his younger cousin Hajj Amin. Both drew the ire of a growing opposition movement. Hajj Amin, however, had a different relationship to the *mu'aradah* than the AE, mostly because of the difference in the positions of the AE and SMC relative to the British. The case of Raghib al-Nashashibi illustrates this point well. Nashashibi had accepted Governor Storrs' appointment to the mayoralty of Jerusalem after Musa Kazim's ouster for his role in the Nabi Musa riots. The new mayor was instrumental in pushing Husam Jarallah aside, a move which rescued Hajj Amin's candidacy. Raghib's cooperation had come over the protest of Hajj Amin's detractors including some members of the Nashashibi family, but his compliance with the

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<sup>79</sup> Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, 29.

<sup>80</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 203.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-03.



Mufti's growing power did not last. Hajj Amin was a threat to the Nashashibis because his power was based on a formidable combination of administrative authority, financial resources, and British backing. Nashashibi and five of his supporters boycotted the 1922 SMC elections, though this move was not very effective as it resulted in an easy victory for the Mufti.<sup>82</sup>

Although Hajj Amin was in a more secure position because of British support and his broad autonomy over religious affairs, he was not immune to the challenge from the *mu'aradah*. The controversy surrounding the 1926 SMC elections is further evidence of growing discontent over Husayni dominance. The elections also indicate how continued British involvement in the SMC was an important influence that was absent from interactions between the AE and the opposition.

The SMC constitution stipulated that elections should be held every four years, although it was vague about whether or not the president was elected permanently.<sup>83</sup> In the ensuing race for the other four seats the results returned two opposition supporters and two Hajj Amin supporters; but a civil court nullified the results on technical grounds when both sides contested the districts where they had lost. The British authorities appointed two opposition members and two Husayni supporters, resulting in the same distribution returned by the contested results.<sup>84</sup> Hajj Amin kept a majority on the council and did not have to face reelection, which was particularly critical as it gave him lifetime control over the most powerful position in Muslim Palestine.

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<sup>82</sup> Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, 12.

<sup>83</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 197-98.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 236-237; Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 98.

Although the Mufti had to admit the opposition into the SMC, he was in a stronger position than the AE. The main reason for this was that he enjoyed British support for his office which, although controlling considerable finances and a vast network of patronage, was largely nonpolitical until 1930; and while his disdain for Zionism was well-known, political advocacy was left to the Arab Executive. Hajj Amin did not endure the public failure of the AE because in the 1920s he did not make any concrete attempts to lobby the British or turn his anti-Zionist views into real action. In fact, the main condition of his support from the British was based on his willingness to abstain from politics. In short, the AE had somewhat defined political goals but was weak, divided, and lacked standing with the British. Hajj Amin al-Husayni had British backing and appeared strong, but he did not yet wield his power to oppose the advance of Zionism through immigration and land purchase.

The Arab Executive initially showed some organizational capability as the leading organization of the national movement by convening annual congresses and coordinating political action between the national and local levels, but its effectiveness gradually waned and its structure broke down as it faced mounting challenges from the opposition. Although it reconstituted itself by incorporating the opposition, the AE remained an elite organization beset by infighting and it lacked any official channels to influence British policy. In consolidating his power as Grand Mufti and president of the Supreme Muslim Council, Hajj Amin al-Husayni traded his earlier militancy for British support and wide-ranging control over Islamic affairs in Palestine; and while he benefitted from close relations with the British, his pledge to refrain from politics limited the extent of his political contributions.

The mandate era is remembered today for the volatile relations between Arabs and Jews and the failure of the British to properly adjudicate the situation. This legacy is understandable given the increasing frequency of violence after 1929. Although the years between 1922 and 1929 were generally tranquil, they are key for understanding the troubles that later confronted the Arab leadership. First, Palestine was administered as its own mandate, and it was unique in being designated as the site of the Jewish national home. While this seems obvious, it should be stressed that in the few years before the inception of the mandate there was no unanimous support for Palestine as a specific political territory, or the recognition of its population as uniquely Palestinian. The inauguration of the mandate created the climate for the emergence of the AE and SMC as distinctly Palestinian organizations through which the *a'yan* vied for power. After the disappearance of the pan-Arab option from the agenda, these developments reaffirmed the new reality created by the mandate: Palestine was its own political unit, no longer part of the Ottoman Empire and not the southern province of Syria.

After 1920, support for unity with Syria as a national sentiment lessened mainly because the British mandate rendered this politically infeasible. In much the same way, the strength of the Palestinian national movement was also influenced by the political developments that unfolded in the early years of the mandate. The inception of the mandate was a political development which encouraged the rise of the AE as a national institution. This process also worked in reverse; the lack of political development brought about the decline of national organizations. The AE was weakened by 1927, as were the MCA chapters that it relied upon heavily. This was a consequence of disagreement within the Arab leadership, a disconcerting trend that was enabled by the fact that the AE had no

significant accomplishments to sustain its morale. As the leading organization of the fledgling national movement, it was crippled by the failure to gain official access to the British authorities.

Thus the national movement was already at an impasse in the late 1920s. The mandate had created a territorial entity as the platform for the growth of the Palestinian national movement, but none of the political tools necessary for the fulfillment of national aspirations. The text of the mandate was vague in its references to the Arab population and completely silent on the issues of an Arab agency or legislative council. With the failure to come to terms on an Arab representative body and the lack of political progress that followed, the Arab leaders were left to fight amongst each another.

In addition to the decline of pan-Arabism and political stagnation on the British front, there were other factors that either created disincentives for cooperation or at least hindered it. One was the widespread persistence of class, village, and family divisions through Palestinian Arab society and the generally submissive attitude of the lower classes. For the *a'yan* there was not yet much pressure from below for unity or political progress. The national movement also lost a major motivating factor with the temporary reduction in the number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine. Immigration had receded to negligible levels by 1928 and with it the perceived threat of Zionism seemed to decrease. Neither of these trends would hold. The next chapter will analyze how Jewish immigration and land purchase both coincided with and catalyzed socioeconomic changes. These changes politicized new segments of the Arab population and tested the political capability of its leadership.

## CHAPTER IV

### SOCIAL CHANGE

Most of the political and national developments analyzed so far have been concerned with the dealings of the *a'yan* and the organizations that they controlled. The activity of the political and social elite is definitely important for understanding the early history of the Palestinian national movement and the nature of the obstacles facing the movement. The *a'yan* had served the Ottomans well as a local 'service aristocracy', and during the first decade of the mandate they maintained their leadership over the Arab population while presiding over a period which was generally peaceful, though not without tensions. The sources of these tensions, which would manifest themselves in the early 1930s, relate to two trends already evident in Ottoman Palestine: Arab uneasiness over Jewish immigration and the precarious economic situation of the *fellahin*.

Arab opposition to Zionism increased substantially in the early twentieth century and was further bolstered by the announcement of the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Also, many *fellahin* had become tenant farmers during the era of the Tanzimat reforms. They had ceded title to the *a'yan*, or to wealthy Arabs living outside of Palestine, to avoid Ottoman registration and tax liability. During the mandate these two aspects intersected when large numbers of *fellahin* were evicted after Jewish buyers purchased the plots which the peasants had cultivated but did not legally own. This phenomenon was at the

center of a series of socioeconomic changes which altered Palestinian culture. Many of the old cultural traits of the Ottoman era – decentralization, a traditional economy, and rigid social hierarchy – were largely, though not entirely, superseded by more dynamic patterns of social interaction and economic diversification. The position of the traditional Arab leadership was not immediately threatened, but these social changes meant that their inability to win concessions from the British was beginning to have wider ramifications.

### The Western Wall Riots

In the summer of 1929 violence broke out at the Western (Wailing) Wall in Jerusalem, a place of deep religious importance to both Jews and Muslims. It was the only remaining portion of an outer wall that had once surrounded Herod's temple. The temple had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE and was one of the most important Jewish holy sites. To Muslims, the Wall was below the Haram al-Sharif, the third holiest site of Islam, where the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock had been built. Muslims believe that the Prophet tethered his horse to the wall before ascending to heaven from the Dome of the Rock.<sup>85</sup> A disagreement over worship practices that had begun a year earlier turned into Arab-Jewish riots resulting in the death of 133 Jews and 116 Arabs. The British authorities established a commission headed by Sir Walter Shaw to investigate the immediate causes of the violence. The Shaw Commission did not confine itself to the details of the riots; it also made sweeping observations about the nature of the problems of mandatory Palestine and the issues confronting the Arab

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<sup>85</sup> Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 126.

population. Issued in 1931, the report stated that the main cause of Arab attacks was, “the Arab feelings of animosity and hostility to the Jews consequent upon the disappointment of their political and national aspirations and fear for their economic future.”<sup>86</sup> The report noted the presence of “landless and discontented” groups of Arabs that were growing as a result of the *yishuv*. It cited Jewish immigration and land purchases as the sources of Arab discontent and recommended closer British regulation in these areas.<sup>87</sup>

The fear of immigration on the part of the Arab population reflected its uneasiness over the real changes that had taken place in the demography of Palestine. An Ottoman census taken in 1914 had placed the total population of Palestine at 689, 272 with a Jewish population of about 60,000.<sup>88</sup> The British also conducted a census in 1922 that recorded 757,000 inhabitants, 89 percent Arab (i.e., Christian and Muslim) and 11 percent Jewish.<sup>89</sup> The Jewish population was predominantly urban: almost three-quarters of the 83,794 Jews lived in the urban areas in or around Jerusalem, Jaffa and Tel Aviv.<sup>90</sup> About 20,000 Jews resided in the north, including 6,000 in Haifa.<sup>91</sup> Conversely, the Arab population was predominantly rural. Seventy-one percent of Arabs were classified as rural in 1922.<sup>92</sup> This trend held steady into the mid-1930s with a only a quarter living in

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<sup>86</sup> Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 236.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid; Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 129-30.

<sup>88</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The Demographic Transformation of Palestine," in *The Transformation of Palestine*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (Evanston, IL: Northwest University Press, 1971), 141.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 142. This census did have some methodological deficiencies. Nevertheless, it serves as an important benchmark for understanding the changing population of Palestine. Also, Abu-Lughod estimates that two-thirds of the Jewish population was European immigrants and their children. We can assume the remainder were indigenous ‘Arab Jews’, although some Yemenis had arrived before the First World War.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 142-43.

<sup>92</sup> Ylana N. Miller, "Administrative Policy in Rural Palestine: The Impact of British Norms on Arab Community Life, 1920-1948," in *Palestinian Society and Politics*, ed. Joel S. Migdal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 127.

towns, compared to the Jewish population which, by that time, was still only a quarter rural.<sup>93</sup>

It is interesting that the Shaw Report cited Jewish immigration as a major source of Arab discontent, because by that time Jewish immigration had begun to stagnate. Between 1919 and 1923 annual immigration did not exceed 9,000. This figure soared to 34,386 in 1924 before plummeting to 3,000 in 1927 when the number of departures actually exceeded the number of arrivals. Annual immigration remained below 5,000 through 1931.<sup>94</sup> If immigration was a main source of Arab discontent, as the Shaw Report contends, it raises the question of just how the immigration issue was affecting Arab society and politics, particularly when relatively few Jews were entering Palestine, and the ones that did settled in cities far away from the mostly rural Arab population. This is best answered with an examination of another observation of the report – the issue of Jewish land acquisition and the rise of a “landless and discontented” Arab class.

### The Land Issue

From the outset, the importance of land ownership in understanding the Arab-Israeli conflict is obvious. Jews and Arabs had competing visions of the future of Palestine. For the Zionists, control of the physical space meant credibility for their claim that the land was rightfully theirs, and created “facts on the ground” and a legally recognized reality of the Jewish presence which bolstered that claim. Like Jewish

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<sup>93</sup> Roger Owen, "Economic Development in Mandatory Palestine: 1918-1948," in *The Palestinian Economy: Studies in Development under Prolonged Occupation*, ed. George T. Abed (London: Routledge, 1988), 15.

<sup>94</sup> Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929*, 17-18; McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine : Population History and Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate*, 227.



immigration, land purchase had already begun before the start of the mandate. According to one estimate, Jews had purchased 650,000 dunams of land before 1920.<sup>95</sup> The two issues were also similar in their uneven distribution in the first decade of the mandate. In 1921 Jewish land purchase totaled 90,785 dunams; two years later it was only 17,493 dunams. In 1925 the figure rose to an unprecedented 176,124 dunams before falling to less than 20,000 in 1927, and rising again to 65,000 in 1929.<sup>96</sup> By the end of the mandate in 1947 Jews had purchased 1.73 million dunams, amounting to roughly 24 percent of all cultivable land or 7 percent of the total land area. A survey in 1931 listed the total land area of Palestine as 26.6 million dunams. The amount considered cultivable was around 8 million, though this was the subject of some dispute.<sup>97</sup>

These statistics do not really convey the centrality of the land issue in the evolution of the Palestinian national movement and how it contributed to changes in the social composition of the Arab population. The specific circumstances of the land sales and the ways in which these circumstances changed over the first fifteen years of the mandate are crucial for understanding the struggle that transformed the political climate of Arab society in Palestine. One issue is why Palestinians would willingly sell their lands to Jews. In reality, before the 1930s the majority of land sales were made by non-resident Arabs who, as noted earlier, had purchased substantial amounts of land in Palestine during the late Ottoman era. During the long drought of the 1920s, inefficiency

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<sup>95</sup> Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Jewish Problems in Palestine and Europe. United Nations General Assembly. Special Committee on Palestine, *A Survey of Palestine*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1991), 244. A dunam is equal to 1/4 acre.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Stein, *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939*, 4. According to Table 1 there were 8.25 million dunams of cultivable area. Roger Owen cites a 1930s government estimate of 7.3 million with additional 'marginal land' in the Beersheba sub-district to the south. Owen, "Economic Development in Mandatory Palestine: 1918-1948," 20.

and lack of investment capital turned large landholdings into something of a liability. Groups like the Jewish National Fund and the Palestine Land Development Company could offer far more than the land was really worth and absentee landowners were eager to take advantage.<sup>98</sup>

In the 1920s and early 1930s, the vast majority of Jewish land purchases resulted from the sales by “several hundred” Palestinian and non-Palestinian Arabs who owned large parcels.<sup>99</sup> For example, the Sursuq family of Beirut was the main seller of large tracts of land in the Jezreel Valley. The sales, which occurred from 1921-25 and totaled roughly 240,000 dunams, were to the Jewish National Fund and American Zion Commonwealth.<sup>100</sup> The former was a successful outfit, purchasing 270,084 dunams by the end of 1930, 90 percent of which came from absentee landowners.<sup>101</sup> Though most transactions involved less land, sales between absentee landlords and Jewish land agencies were typical. The best available data on land purchases covers just over half of all Jewish land purchases up to 1936. In the years preceding the riots at the Western Wall a trend is clear. Between 1920 and 1927 82 percent of Jewish land purchases were from absentee landlords.<sup>102</sup> Between 1923 and 1927 large non-Palestinian landowners accounted for 86 percent of all sales; 12.4 percent of sales were from large Palestinian landowners, and 1.6 percent were from the *fellahin*.<sup>103</sup> Also, between the 1880s and the late 1930s most sales were not in densely populated regions and Jewish-Arab clashes

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<sup>98</sup> Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, vol. 2, 1929-1939 (London: Frank Cass, 1977), 81.

<sup>99</sup> Stein, *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939*, 178.

<sup>100</sup> Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 122.

<sup>101</sup> A. Granott, *The Land System in Palestine : History and Structure* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952), 276.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 277. This figure is based on data collected by the Statistical Department of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in 1938. In sum, it includes 55.4 percent of the Jewish land purchases between 1878 and 1936.

<sup>103</sup> Also cited in Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 83-84.

resulting from peasant evictions, though not unheard of, were rare and generally “devoid of any political character.”<sup>104</sup> The Zionists wanted to buy large, contiguous strips of land, with few inhabitants and no tenants. In this sense, working with absentee landlords was the best possible scenario and one that had seemed to work without inciting the Arab population before the 1929 riots.

The Shaw Report was both diagnostic and prophetic. It is true that the problems over land sales concerned Arabs during the 1920s. Yet few Palestinian Arabs were involved in or affected by Jewish land purchases compared to the seven years between 1930 and 1936. After 1929 the seriousness of the land issue deepened in three ways. First, Palestinians replaced the other Arabs as the primary sellers of land. Second, considerably more Palestinians were dispossessed as a result of land sales. This dispossession was the catalyst for a larger transformation in which unprecedented numbers of Palestinians took part in new forms of political participation, social interaction, and economic diversification. Finally, the land issue exposed the inability of the Arab leadership to mitigate public frustration effectively or to redress popular grievances with the British authorities.

Beginning in the late 1920s the percentage of sellers living inside Palestine rose swiftly. The data available from 1928-1932 and 1933-1936 reflect the changing distribution of sellers. Large non-Palestinian landowners accounted for 45.5 percent of sales in the first period and a mere 14.9 percent in the second, a significant drop from the 86 percent of 1923-1927. Large Palestinian landholders had been only 12.4 percent of sellers in the mid-1920s. Their share rose to 36.2 percent in the following four years and

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

then to 62.7 percent in the mid-1930s. The share of the *fellahin* also rose, from 1.6 percent to 18.3 percent to 22.5 percent, indicating the Zionist purchasers' willingness to buy much smaller plots of land.<sup>105</sup>

The statistics are valuable for gaining an understanding of the history of Jewish land purchase, but they provide no explanation of why Palestinian landholders, large and small, would sell their land to Jewish immigrants whose presence they resented. Here it is useful to recall the land situation in Palestine in the late Ottoman era. The concentration of land in the hands of non-Palestinian Arabs or urban *a'yan* meant that most of those living on the land and in villages had no legal right to the land on which they worked. Just as it had for the large non-Palestinian landholders, the entry of Jewish land purchasing organizations into the equation was an enticing prospect for the *a'yan*, most of whom were urban-dwelling absentee landlords. With the benefit of wealthy European backers Jewish interests were willing to pay more than the going market price. These sales meant that Palestinians who had worked the land for generations were evicted from the land and uprooted from their traditional homes. Sales by large landholders were devastating to the tenant farmers that had relied on the land for generations.

The fate of the small farmers who actually owned their plots was another matter. Large landowners often engaged in land speculation as a profitable business move and to maintain their standing relative to other *a'yan*. For small "owner-occupiers," the decision to sell was a matter of survival rather than profit. The *fellahin*, *musha'* shareholders and other owner-occupiers were crippled with debt incurred largely because of exorbitant interest rates. According to one source, by 1930 "30 percent of all Palestinian villagers

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 83-84; Granott, *The Land System in Palestine : History and Structure*, 277.

were totally landless, while as many as 75 to 80 percent held insufficient land to meet their subsistence needs.”<sup>106</sup> Many small to medium size landholders sold off all or part of their plots to pay debts.<sup>107</sup> The problem of debt was further compounded by a bleak agricultural economy and unfavorable tax policy. In 1928 new land taxes were introduced based on the crop prices of 1923-24, even though prices had dropped considerably since then.<sup>108</sup> To make matters worse, there were a series of bad harvests from 1931-1934. The price of wheat fell from £P10.81/ton in 1929 to £P6.97/ton in 1931. Barley fell from £P7.66/ton to £P3.03/ton.<sup>109</sup> In 1930 the government of Palestine investigated 21,000 fellah families in 104 villages, approximately 26 percent of the farming community. The investigation found that the average debt of a fellah family was £P27 pounds at an annual interest rate of 30 percent. Average yearly income was only £P25-30 pounds.<sup>110</sup>

Some *fellahin* living along the coastal plain near Jaffa or Haifa sold part of their land and converted their remaining holdings from vegetable or cereal production to citrus crops. In the 1920s and 1930s Jews and Arabs looked to a rapidly growing citrus industry to turn a profit. For the Arabs, selling part of their land provided the necessary capital for start-up costs like irrigation systems. The amount of land area devoted to Arab citrus groves grew more than fivefold between 1922 and 1935.<sup>111</sup> But there was little hope of economic salvation in citriculture, as rapid expansion led to overproduction. Exports rose from 2.4 million cases in 1930-31 to 13 million in 1938-39 while prices reportedly fell by

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<sup>106</sup> Swedenburg, "The Role of the Palestinian Peasantry in the Great Revolt (1936-1939)," 182.

<sup>107</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 86.

<sup>108</sup> Owen, "Economic Development in Mandatory Palestine: 1918-1948," 21.

<sup>109</sup> Stein, *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939*, 143.

<sup>110</sup> Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Jewish Problems in Palestine and Europe. United Nations General Assembly. Special Committee on Palestine, *A Survey of Palestine*, 364; Owen, "Economic Development in Mandatory Palestine: 1918-1948," 21.

<sup>111</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 84.

half.<sup>112</sup> Arab growers also faced competition from Jewish planters who had access to more capital and advanced technology. Stein notes the impact of these changes on Palestinian society.

For at least the first decade of the Mandate, most of the large landowners were able to retain considerable socioeconomic influence over the fellaheen classes. Gradually, the ties between the fellaheen and the landlord-merchant-creditor were reduced. As land slowly came into Jewish ownership and occupation during the Mandate, Palestinian Arab social relationships were altered to the detriment of Palestinian Arab unanimity.<sup>113</sup>

Indeed, the increasing scope of land transfer significantly altered the social structure of the Arab community in Palestine. The newly landless Arabs, who by one estimate already amounted to 30 percent of all Arab villagers in 1930, were a catalyst for the changing power structure. The failure of the traditional economy meant that peasants were experiencing greater 'freedom' from the social network of the village and the political hierarchy that reinforced the power of the urban notables. Landless Arabs and those whose holdings were insufficient for their own subsistence began to seek new work opportunities in the growing urban centers. Urbanization and in-migration meant that the lower classes became part of more dynamic social patterns. This may have been to the detriment of unity, but that unity was based on a stagnant *a'yan-fellahin* relationship that could no longer provide security. As the mandate continued and the economic situation worsened, the influence of the notables began to wane. A British official observed that by 1927, two years before the Western Wall riots, the notables appeared apprehensive over the peasantry's "growing tendency to distinguish between national and Effendi [notable]

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<sup>112</sup> Owen, "Economic Development in Mandatory Palestine: 1918-1948," 22.

<sup>113</sup> Stein, *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939*, 33.

class interests.”<sup>114</sup> The notables had reason to be nervous. The rural to urban migration of the lower classes was like shifting sand beneath their feet.

### Arab Society in Transition

The two main characteristics of the Arab social transformation in Palestine were urbanization and increasing wage labor. Between 1922 and 1931 the Arab population of Haifa grew by 87 percent, and Jaffa's Arab population increased by 63 percent over the same span.<sup>115</sup> Urbanization was not limited to the western coastal region, although population growth in those cities outpaced that of the areas to the east. Jerusalem's Arab population grew by 37 percent in the decade before 1931, and Ramleh and Lydda grew by 43 percent and 39 percent, respectively.<sup>116</sup> Thus some of the fastest Arab population growth was in the areas with the least *a'yan* influence. Many urban migrants found work on Jewish citrus plantations, in construction, and to a lesser extent in industrial employment. One major source of employment was the public works projects initiated by the British administration.

Their entrance into the city brought the landless Arab class into contact with a variety of new influences. One was the predominantly Christian urban middle class of lawyers, teachers, civil servants, and artisans. A Muslim professional middle class also began to emerge in the 1920s and would eventually challenge the notables. Many were educated and sought advancement through careers in government or commerce. Aside

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<sup>114</sup> Report from Colonel Symes, governor of the Northern District to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. Nels Johnson, *Islam and the Politics of Meaning in Palestinian Nationalism* (London ; Boston: Kegan Paul International, 1982), 37.

<sup>115</sup> Rachelle Taqqu, "Peasants into Workmen: Internal Labor Migration and the Arab Village Community under the Mandate," in *Palestinian Society and Politics*, ed. Joel S. Midgal (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 263.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

from its disdain for the growing Jewish presence, this group harbored some resentment toward the Muslim elite as well as the Christian Arabs. This class would begin “to comprise an important independent political influence in the 1930s”.<sup>117</sup>

The growth of the Christian and Muslim middle classes indicated some advances in key areas like education and the economy. There was a noticeable increase in the manufacture of consumer goods. Between 1921 and 1935 the number of firms using power-driven machinery rose from seven to 313.<sup>118</sup> New opportunities were created in areas like “education, medicine, law, white-collar government employment, and journalism.”<sup>119</sup> In the realm of education the number of Christian schools rose from 58 to 99 between 1928 and 1936, with overall enrollment more than doubling during that time. During the same era, the number of Muslim-operated schools jumped from 75 to 175 and enrollment more than tripled.<sup>120</sup>

The migration of landless Arabs to the burgeoning Palestinian cities had a significant impact both on the newly arrived and on the cities they entered. The newly urbanized *fellahin* were introduced to forms of interaction that had been rare or nonexistent in their former lives. In Haifa for example, the Palestine Arab Workers Society was organized in 1925. This was the first Western-style labor organization, though it lacked the funding and organization needed to be effective. In addition, town cafés served as venues where Arab newspapers were read aloud, and, somewhat later, where news could be heard on the radio. Also, poetry was reprinted in newspapers or

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<sup>117</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 61.

<sup>118</sup> Hurewitz, *The Struggle for Palestine*, 32.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 36.



recited in public.<sup>121</sup> Since most of the *fellahin* who had come to the cities were illiterate, public recitals were an important channel for news and commentary on the Arab situation.

The cities and towns were centers of the growing Palestinian nationalist class, where Arabs, Muslim and Christian, were more likely to be educated, literate and professional. In other words, they were more likely to possess the means of expressing Arab grievances regarding British policy, articulating resentment toward Zionism, and formulating alternatives to the entrenched urban elites like the Nashashibis and Husaynis, which, as we will see, were gradually losing their monopoly over Palestinian Arab politics. The elite decline was inseparable from the socioeconomic changes taking place.

Yet at the same time, the city did not adequately replace the village as an economic, political and social provider for the lower classes. Although urban migrants had greater freedom than before, they never assimilated fully into the wage labor work force or urban life. Life in the cities was tough. In Jaffa and Haifa many *fellahin* lived in shacks on the outskirts of town and the established urbanites generally kept the newcomers at a distance. Skilled and professional urban Arabs could earn much higher wages than the migrants who struggled to find work as day laborers.<sup>122</sup> Work in cities was sporadic. Jewish businesses preferred to hire Jews and when Arabs could find work in such businesses it was low-paying and temporary. For the migrants, their links to the capitalist economy meant enduring risk and uncertainty. There was the prospect, but not the promise, of prosperity. In fact, many urban migrants maintained ties to their villages

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<sup>121</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 64-65.

<sup>122</sup> Artisans and skilled laborers could earn four to six times as much as day laborers. Taqqu, "Peasants into Workmen: Internal Labor Migration and the Arab Village Community under the Mandate," 270.

because their wages were insufficient to sustain them. In some cases wage labor was organized through existing village structures. For public works projects the British authorities often contracted workers from nearby villages, using the village *mukhtar* as the recruiter.<sup>123</sup> On a broader level, Arab society retained its rural character well into the mid-1930s with three-quarters of the population living on the land and 62 percent still working in agriculture.<sup>124</sup> Though many of those counted as rural dwellers and farm workers periodically lived and worked in cities and towns, it is clear that many kept their connections to the land.

Nevertheless, the experience of the Palestinian villagers who found part-time or seasonal work in cities and towns was integral to the formation of a broader Palestinian national consciousness. The entry of peasants into a wage labor system weakened the elite patronage networks that operated in the villages. Interaction with the urban middle class was important because it gave peasants contact with another class that shared similar resentments over the activities of the traditional elite, which was either profiting financially from land sales or failing politically through its inept advocacy of Arab grievances. Also, the rural to urban path of the displaced villagers gave them a unique first-hand experience of the two main issues cited by the Shaw Report - land purchase and immigration. Many had been evicted as a result of land sales to Jews and as migrant workers they often competed with the predominantly urban Jewish immigrant population. It is true that the Arab and Jewish economies were largely separate. Jewish firms were discouraged from hiring Arabs for the sake of solidarity and in the interest of a self-

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Owen, "Economic Development in Mandatory Palestine: 1918-1948," 15-16.

sufficient economy.<sup>125</sup> But Arabs were given limited opportunities in the Jewish sector, enough so that resentment over failed expectations was aimed at the Jewish immigrants who did receive those jobs, or were paid more for the same work; and it constituted an experience to which the urban notables and the more secure urban middle class could not as easily relate.

The economic plight of the Palestinians and the social shifts in Palestinian society did not by themselves generate opposition to, or dissatisfaction with, the Husaynis, the Nashashibis, or the other urban notables. It was the political fallout of the 1929 riots that helped to aggravate the growing schisms in Palestinian politics. A second commission headed by Sir John Hope-Simpson found that exclusionary Jewish labor practices and land policies were contributing to the landless Arab problem, as well as violating the clause in Article 6 of the mandate which stipulated that the “rights and position of the other sections of the population” should not be prejudiced.<sup>126</sup> The Colonial Secretary, Lord Passfield, issued a new White Paper based on Hope-Simpson’s findings, calling for restrictions on Jewish land purchase and immigration. After fierce objections from Zionists in London and Palestine in 1931, Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald wrote a letter to Chaim Weizmann, who had resigned in protest from his position as head of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency. MacDonald reassured Weizmann

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<sup>125</sup> Barbara Smith writes that, “at least in the economic sphere, the institutional and ideological basis for separatism had crystallized by the time the 1929 riots signaled the growing anger and frustration of the Arab population....it was during the 1920s that the spirit of Zionist separatism began to be transformed into socioeconomic reality.” Barbara J. Smith, *The Roots of Separatism in Palestine : British Economic Policy, 1920-1929*, 1st ed., Contemporary Issues in the Middle East. (Syracuse [New York]: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 3-4.

<sup>126</sup> Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 130; Rubin, ed. *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict 4th Ed.*, 36.

that the British government was not considering prohibiting land purchase or stopping immigration.<sup>127</sup>

The Arab Executive had sent delegates to London in 1930, the first delegation since 1923. MacDonald's repudiation of the Passfield White Paper and the findings of the two commissions were important events for Palestinian Arab politics and for the subsequent history of the Palestine mandate. The "black letter", as it became known, humiliated the AE and made it look weak in the eyes of the Arab public. It also galvanized a new type of political activism separate from that of the elites. This activism reflected resentment not only against Zionism, but against the Arab elites and the British authorities as well.

The socioeconomic changes of the 1920s and 1930s and the political aftermath of the Wailing Wall riots revealed the underlying vulnerabilities in the rule of the notables. Before discussing the specific political groups and activists that emerged in the early 1930s, it is important to understand some of the sources of the *a'yan* weakness.

The mandate had delineated a political territory that served as a backdrop for the growth of the Palestinian national movement. The uniform legal, bureaucratic, and administrative system instituted by the British did not eschew all notions of pan-Arabism, but the everyday issues facing the Palestinian Arabs inevitably revolved around issues specific to Palestine. For the traditional leadership, the mandate meant a rise in the importance of Jerusalem. Many of the *a'yan* were holdovers from the latter days of the Ottoman Empire. (The Mufti himself was younger, but the Husayni family name was synonymous with the establishment.) But unlike in Ottoman times Jerusalem was not

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<sup>127</sup> Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinians : The Making of a People*, 91.

subordinate to Istanbul. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the fall of Faisal's government in Damascus had left the Jerusalem families as the *de facto* leaders of the Arab community in Palestine. Although not popularly elected, the *a'yan* were generally accepted by the Arab population as its natural leaders, since liberal notions of democracy and equality were not widely held in Arab Palestine. This was reinforced by the British policy of dealing primarily with the notables and respecting the traditional hierarchy.

For these reasons the position of the *a'yan* was not subject to direct and immediate challenges from either the British or the nonelite sectors of Arab society. But the Arab leaders were in a tenuous position, in that they had to maintain a somewhat civil relationship with both groups in order to preserve their own power. The leaders' relationship with the mandate government could be uncooperative, as it generally was, but almost never violent or confrontational. The Arab leaders could not incite the population or openly defy mandate policy without risking a backlash from the British authorities. They had learned this much after the Nabi Musa riots. Conversely, the British could not forcefully win Arab support for the terms of the mandate (i.e., the Jewish national home). In the absence of any agreement on a legislative council, a tacit acceptance of noncooperation developed between the two sides. The Arab leadership was not complaisant or accepting of Zionism, nor was the mandate government blind to Arab concerns. It was simply that the two sides were too far apart on key issues. The Arab leadership did not want to acquiesce with a formal acceptance of Zionism, while the mandate government remained committed to the creation of a Jewish national home and, as the MacDonald letter demonstrated, Zionist leaders in London and Palestine were very effective at mobilizing against any signs of flagging support on the British side.

The relationship between the Arab leaders and the Arab public was more complex. The mandate government and its positions were a well-known variable; its policies were promulgated by law, processed through bureaucracies, and carried out through official channels. This does not mean that British officials within the government always agreed on how to proceed, but they generally adhered to the official position. The Arab public differed in that it did not address its leaders as one voice, but increasingly as a plurality of voices. By 1931 the Arab population in Palestine had climbed to over 850,000. In addition to being much larger than it was in 1917, it was considerably more dynamic. The power structure that anchored the position of the Arab leadership was still largely based on the traditional hierarchy that had accompanied the rise of the *a'yan* in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Jewish land purchases had played a major role in exposing the inherent problems in the decades-old system for land ownership, and had given rise to considerable Arab landlessness. This situation contributed to greater social diversification, and very often, to economic deterioration. These developments in turn created a sense of urgency to stem the tide of Jewish land purchases and immigration, and because the Arab leadership was incapable of doing so, there was now an opening for newer and more radical political groups. The emergence of such groups indicated that Arab politics was evolving in response to the economic and social changes in Arab society, and that the political role of the Palestinian leadership as the main voice of the national movement was about to be challenged.

## CHAPTER V

### NEW VOICES, OLD PROBLEMS

The 1930s was a pivotal decade in the history of the Palestinian national movement. As the leaders of the movement, members of the traditional elite found themselves in a difficult position. The Arab public beneath them was changing. The Zionist initiatives – Jewish immigration and land purchase – were gaining momentum and creating unrest, particularly among the lower classes. Until this point politics had been controlled by the *a'yan*, particularly notable families from Jerusalem like the Husaynis and Nashashibis. In this decade the leadership was confronted with new political groups that often advocated direct, and sometimes violent, confrontation with British officials. The traditional leaders remained entangled in their own feuds at a time when they could least afford to be. They were caught between a restive Arab public, new radical voices, increasing Jewish immigration and land purchases, and a generally unsympathetic mandate administration. The situation worsened when it was publicized that some members of the AE were complicit in land sales, either as sellers or as brokers. This and other forms of collaboration with Zionists heightened the internal divisions in Arab society. The Arab Revolt of 1936-39 was a direct outcome of these factors and the result of an untenable political situation. Political problems were compounded by escalating violence led by guerilla bands that acted independently of any higher

command. The national leaders were powerless to stop the violence, and in an attempt to help their situation they looked to outside Arab leaders to help remedy the situation. Other Arabs took an active part in supporting the Arab Revolt in Palestine, and their leaders became intermediaries between the Palestinians and the British. Ultimately, the inherent weaknesses of the traditional Palestinian leadership resulted in their losing control of the national movement. Political leadership of the Palestinian cause passed to outside Arab leaders who were sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, but without a vital stake in Palestine.

### Challenge and Response

An array of new organizations had emerged by the early 1930s. The Young Men's Muslim Association had already been established in the late 1920s. The Arab Young Men's Association (*Jam'iyyat al-Shubban al-'Arab*) was formed in the early 1930s and attacked the failure of notable leadership.<sup>128</sup> In January 1932 the first National Congress of Arab Youth met in Jaffa. Like other new groups, it acted as a radical influence on the AE. Specifically, it was the driving force behind the decision of the AE to stage protests in Jerusalem in 1933. It also organized the Arab Boy Scouts of Palestine in 1934. Through its branches the Boy Scouts imbued the Arab youth with nationalist ideals and encouraged shopkeepers and merchants to participate in strikes.<sup>129</sup>

Earlier, in July 1931, the Nablus MCA showed its growing radicalism by renaming itself the Patriotic Arab Association (*al-Jam'iyyah al-'Arabiyyah al-Wataniyyah*) and convening a conference in Nablus that was attended by three hundred

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<sup>128</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 119.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 122-23.



young radicals. The congress elected an executive committee of non-Jerusalemmites and demanded a stronger anti-British stance on the part of the AE.<sup>130</sup> There were also calls to establish a defense organization and acquire weapons, as well as accusations against prominent Arab leaders for their complicity in the land sales to Jews.<sup>131</sup>

The claims of the dissident groups raised a legitimate point; the Arab leadership and some members of the AE in particular were willing participants in the land sales. This began to be more widely known around the time these new political groups began to emerge. The Hope-Simpson report had not discussed Arab collaboration in Jewish land sales, though the British tried to take various initiatives to alleviate the land problem. The Protection of Cultivators Ordinance of 1929, a British-sponsored initiative, required a series of administrative and bureaucratic steps for the completion of a sale. The AE rejected the measure publicly, demanding a full prohibition of land sales. The reality was that compliance with British policies would lead to greater transparency and expose AE participation. Two of its members, Mughannam Mughannam, a Christian Arab from Jerusalem, and Fakhri al-Nashashibi, served as intermediaries in the sale of 8,000 dunams at Wadi Qabani, though there was no internal censure to match the Executive's public outcry.<sup>132</sup> British official Lewis French issued a report in 1931 confirming the involvement of AE members in land sales. The official response of the AE focused on Jewish exclusivity in labor practices and the lack of unoccupied land with subsistence-

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>131</sup> Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, 30-31.

<sup>132</sup> Stein, *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939*, 124-25.

viable plots. There was some ‘mild condemnation’ of land brokers and sellers but no denial of French’s findings which had publicized the complicity of the AE members.<sup>133</sup>

The issue of land sales relates to a larger and less discussed feature of the early Palestinian national movement - Arab collaboration with Zionism. This was not uncommon during the mandate era; however, defining collaboration is not a simple proposition. As Hillel Cohen has said, differing views over whether or not someone is a traitor are essentially part of the debate over what constitutes the national interest: “A further inquiry into these rival claims reveals that, although they disagree about which acts constitute treason, all agree on one principle: the determining factor is whether the actions taken are for or against the national interest. The argument between the two sides is, in fact, over the nature of the national interest at a given point in time.”<sup>134</sup> As the Arab situation in Palestine became more desperate in the 1930s, charges of collaboration intensified. During the revolt at the end of the decade, Arabs deemed too moderate or not militant enough were often branded with this label.

Determining who was a collaborator is beyond the scope of this paper; it is also very difficult to come to any firm conclusion because such accusations were often politically motivated and therefore potentially less credible. The point is that the continuation of Jewish land purchase was broadly regarded as an activity whose consequences ran counter to the Palestinian Arab national interests. The official AE stance, the Mufti’s speeches, and the British reports all recognized that land sales, when allowed to continue unchecked, had a detrimental effect on the Palestinian national

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 171; Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 38-40.

<sup>134</sup> Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows : Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 5.

movement. The accusations leveled by the Patriotic Arab Association were significant because a radicalized voice was accusing the traditional leaders of an activity that hurt the national interest.

More than any other organization *al-Hizb al-Istiqlal* (Independence Party) personified the newly evolving political structure in Palestine. The party was anti-Zionist, anti-British and critical of the elite Jerusalem families and *a'yan* politics. It called for boycotting British taxes and revived the pan-Arab idea with its call to join Palestine and Syria.<sup>135</sup> The *Istiqlal* leaders – Akram Zu‘aytir, ‘Awni ‘Abd al-Hadi, ‘Izzat Darwaza and Ahmad al-Shuqayri – came from Nablus and the northern districts of Palestine. They were bankers, lawyers, journalists and schoolteachers. Some were members of wealthy provincial families, but the party was distinct from the elite ruling families in Jerusalem.<sup>136</sup> *Istiqlal* raised populist issues such as unemployment, taxation, and the plight of the *fellahin*, while demanding the election of a national parliament and the end of feudal titles like *pasha*, *bey* and *effendi*.<sup>137</sup> The rhetoric of the party aimed to mobilize the lower classes across Palestine as opposed to a particular village or clan, and its broad-based ideological approach was a novelty for Palestinian Arab politics.

The leaders of *Istiqlal* were not new to the political scene, but more importantly they were not closely associated with the Jerusalem families. ‘Awni ‘Abd al-Hadi of Jenin had served as a member of the Hijaz delegation and as an assistant to Faisal at the Paris Peace Conference. ‘Izzat Darwaza was from Nablus and had also been active in

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<sup>135</sup> Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, 34-35.

<sup>136</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 125.

<sup>137</sup> Swedenburg, "The Role of the Palestinian Peasantry in the Great Revolt (1936-1939)," 186.

Arab politics after the war when he rallied for union with Syria. More recently he had convinced the Nablus MCA to change its name to the Patriotic Arab Association.<sup>138</sup>

While *Istiqlal* was the most important new Palestinian organization in the early 1930s, the most prominent individual dissident was 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a radical shaykh based in Haifa. He had attended al-Azhar University in Cairo and fought against the French in Syria in 1919-20. He denounced the AE leaders as insufficiently militant and he criticized the SMC for spending waqf funds on mosque repairs instead of arms.<sup>139</sup> He decried the Jews and the British as infidels and called for *jihad* against both.<sup>140</sup> His message of militancy, piety, sacrifice, unity and patriotism was based on a compelling mixture of the glorification of historic Islamic militants and a pointed nationalist critique of the deteriorating status of the Palestinians under the mandate.<sup>141</sup> Qassam's message resonated particularly with the impoverished Arabs living in shanty towns outside Haifa. Often illiterate and unskilled, these laborers were marginalized by the urban professional classes and the traditional landed elite. Qassam reached out to the lower classes by teaching literacy and religion courses at local mosques in Haifa.<sup>142</sup>

So far, Hajj Amin al-Husayni and the AE members had avoided confronting the British authorities directly. The AE had boycotted or rejected mandate initiatives throughout the 1920s. This did not impede British governance, but rather reinforced the status quo of no official Arab representation. By the early 1930s the AE was in a bad position and was quickly losing popular support. It had been unable either to stem the tide

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<sup>138</sup> Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinians : The Making of a People*, 92.

<sup>139</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 107-08.

<sup>140</sup> Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, 67.

<sup>141</sup> Swedenburg, "The Role of the Palestinian Peasantry in the Great Revolt (1936-1939)," 189-90.

<sup>142</sup> May Seikaly, *Haifa : Transformation of a Palestinian Arab Society 1918-1939* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995), 242-45.

of Zionism or to win concessions from the British. The Executive's incorporation of the *mu'aradah* in 1928 had not ended internal factionalism and family feuds, and it had not remedied the basic issues affecting the *fellahin*. The Mufti held a religious position and while holding firm against Zionism, he too had avoided direct confrontation with the government. This is not surprising since British support had been integral in his rise to power.

Qassam and his followers and *Istiqlal* were both important influences on the Palestinian national moment in the early to mid-1930s. They emerged at a time when the Arab public was losing patience with its leadership, and the leadership was losing patience with the British. In these circumstances, the new forces were significant because they advocated more extreme political positions, such as challenging British authority, as well as alternative means for framing the discourse of the national movement. For Qassam, the national struggle was cast in Islamic terms; for *Istiqlal* the framework was pan-Arabism. Islam and Arabism were not new concepts and it was probably their ubiquitous nature that made them viable forms for the expression of national identity. Furthermore, these ideas were not viewed as mutually exclusive of each other or necessarily in direct competition with a specifically Palestinian nationalism. Kimmerling and Migdal write that, "Often these varying ideas were not recognized as clashing. Darwaza at the same time supported pan-Arabism, Islamicism, and an increased dedication to the Palestinian nationalist ideal."<sup>143</sup> It seems that Qassam and *Istiqlal* used different methods of framing the Palestinian national struggle as a way to advocate

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<sup>143</sup> Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinians : The Making of a People*, 92.

political alternatives to a status quo that had failed to provide any substantive gains for the Palestinian Arab people.

The AE did make some attempts to mollify the situation. With the increase in land sales in the 1930s, members of the Executive and MCA representatives toured the villages to explain the dangers of land sales and the collective consequences of the decision to sell. The AE also paid Arab lawyers who were involved in legal disputes over the eviction of Arab tenants from land that had been purchased by Jews.<sup>144</sup> Between 1932 and 1934 the National Fund operated under the AE as an Arab land-purchasing agency. It attempted to counter Jewish buyers by giving Arabs an alternative to selling their land to Jews. However, it was inundated with far more offers than it could handle and made no purchases after 1933.<sup>145</sup> The sincerity of these efforts is questionable because, as the French Report indicated, a number of AE members had profited directly as either sellers or land brokers.

The SMC also tried to help the Arab cause by purchasing parts of *musha'* holdings. As partial owners of *musha'* land the council would have the ability to block sales and a SMC stake would make the plots less attractive to Jewish buyers, or at least that was the logic. In late 1934 Hajj Amin himself began personally visiting regions where land transfers were high, using fierce Islamic rhetoric to warn of the danger of land sales.<sup>146</sup> The Mufti's newspaper, *al-Jami'ah al-'Arabiyyah*, called the land issue "one of the greatest dangers that threatens the future of our country."<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 93.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 95-98; Hurewitz, *The Struggle for Palestine*, 61.

<sup>147</sup> *Al-Jami'ah al-'Arabiyyah*, 16 September 1932 cited in Stein, *The Land Question in Palestine, 1917-1939*, 183.

Neither the SMC nor the AE could change the harsh reality facing the Arab population. There was a major recession in Palestine between 1928 and 1932 and then Jewish immigration greatly increased between 1933 and 1936. Immigration had dipped below 5,000 in 1931 in the aftermath of the Wailing Wall riots, but the number rose to over 30,000 in 1933 and peaked at just less than 62,000 in 1935.<sup>148</sup> Although the economy of Palestine was technically expanding, it benefitted the Jewish immigrants disproportionately since they received preferential treatment in hiring in the growing coastal cities like Haifa. This fueled resentment among the Arab population. The financial situation of peasant families had improved little; it is estimated that by 1936 the average Arab family had a debt equaling or exceeding its annual income. Land transactions were becoming increasingly violent and police were frequently called to remove tenants that resisted eviction.<sup>149</sup>

By 1936 the land situation in Palestinian society remained problematic not only for those who had been forced to sell, but also for those who managed to keep their land: the distribution had become extremely inequitable. According to a survey, 0.2 percent of individual plots of land were over 1,000 dunams; this amounted to 27.5 percent of the total land area. 8 percent of the plots surveyed, 35.8 percent of the total land area, were between 100 and 1,000 dunams. The remaining 91.8 percent of plots were under 100 dunams and accounted for 36.7 percent of the land area. The minimum amount of land needed for subsistence was between 80 and 90 dunams, and of the plots under 100

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<sup>148</sup> These figures are based on the statistics of the Government Immigration Offices. The statistics of the Jewish Agency Immigration Office vary based on the year. See McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine : Population History and Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate*, 227.

<sup>149</sup> Swedenburg, "The Role of the Palestinian Peasantry in the Great Revolt (1936-1939)," 184-85.

dunams, the majority were actually less than 40 dunams.<sup>150</sup> Therefore, the majority of land available was held by a relatively small fraction of all Palestinian landowners. Small landowners far outnumbered large landowners, though they held a disproportionately small share of total land and the size of their holdings was often insufficient for their own subsistence needs.

### Radicalization

It would be inaccurate to say that Palestinian Arab society became more united in the mid to late 1930s, since in many ways it was as divided as ever. Christians and Muslims shared a tense coexistence. The Nashashibi-Husayni rivalry was becoming intractable. The economic, social and political divide between the *a'yan* and the *fellahin* was growing. Yet at the same time, there was an overall radicalization of the political spectrum that had similar effects on all of the groups. The AE had been uncooperative with the British in the first decade of the mandate, but also generally non-confrontational. There had been few civil disturbances between 1922 and 1929. In the early 1930s this began to change as the AE adopted a more defiant stance.

In August 1931 some senior members of the AE joined in radical demonstrations. Jamal al-Husyani led a demonstration at Government House. The protest led to the jailing of some members of the National Arab Society. In 1933 the Arab Youth Congress staged the Non-Cooperation Congress (*Mu'atmar al-La-ta'awun*) in Jaffa. The Youth Congress favored disengagement from the British, the resignation of public officials and civil

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<sup>150</sup> Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 123-24; Granott, *The Land System in Palestine : History and Structure*, 41.



disobedience.<sup>151</sup> The participation of the Executive at the conference indicated a growing radicalization on its part and foreshadowed the more dramatic steps it would take that fall. In October, at the urging of *Istiqlal* and other militant groups, the AE called for demonstrations in Jerusalem and Jaffa. Clashes with British police ensued resulting in the injury of some of the protesters. Most significant was Musa Kazim, now in his eighties, marching at the front of the procession. It is difficult to say just why Musa Kazim and other AE leaders joined the radical ranks. They were probably wary of being further weakened by their radical challengers and they were certainly frustrated after more than a decade of political stagnation.

The case of the Mufti is more complex but valuable for understanding the political tensions at work in Palestinian Arab society. He had built a strong position for himself during the 1920s. The establishment, expansion, and preservation of his power were the result of a unique mix of his aura as a militant nationalist leader, his initially amenable attitude toward British rule and his family's control over the AE and the SMC. The first two bases of support were contradictory. The third appeared strong but was actually quite fragile. All three began to unravel after 1930.

After generally abstaining from politics in the 1920s, the Mufti became more openly critical of the AE in the 1930s in an attempt to expand his political influence. There was growing rift between Hajj Amin and Musa Kazim. The Mufti had tried to win the presidency of the Arab delegation which traveled to London in 1930, but was denied

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<sup>151</sup> Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, 31-32.

by an alliance between Musa Kazim and the Nashashibi opposition, both of whom were wary of his growing ambition.<sup>152</sup>

Hajj Amin used *al-Jami'ah al-'Arabiyyah* to criticize the AE as too moderate. He attacked its members as traitors and spies, chiding them as 'frail ghosts' for their unwillingness to confront the authorities. Even more damaging was the newspaper's use of the French Report's findings that members of the AE were involved in land sales.<sup>153</sup> By 1932 his attacks on the AE had strained relations with Musa Kazim, fraying the one fragile tie between the Husaynis and the opposition.

But this was not Hajj Amin's biggest problem. It was the contradiction between his militant anti-Zionist image and his compliance with the British. In the eyes of the Arab public the AE had years of failure to its name. Hajj Amin did not, though his mettle had seldom been tested since the Nabi Musa riots in 1920, due to his decision not to engage in politics. This allowed his militant image to endure. His reputation remained intact even after his failed diplomacy with the British after the Wailing Wall riots. Though he had been denied the presidency of the 1930 delegation to London, he had still participated in the mission, which, in light of the MacDonald Letter, was roundly condemned as a failure. Elpeleg notes the double standard for Hajj Amin and the AE.

Although Haj Amin had participated in the political moves in 1930 and had not given in to pressures to discontinue his cooperation with the authorities, he was not held to blame. In the public consciousness, he was seen as representing the militant line. Members of the Arab Executive faced criticism from the general public for having chosen to lobby the British, and they were condemned for having abandoned armed organization.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 110-11.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>154</sup> Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, 30.

Hajj Amin's young supporters figured prominently at the Nablus Conference in 1931, just as he was stepping up his attacks on the AE. But the Mufti was treading a fine line. In 1932 he reached an agreement with the British government to obtain additional funding for the SMC. As the decade continued he remained critical of Zionism but was even more hesitant to attack the British.<sup>155</sup>

One of the planks of the Non-Cooperation Congress was the resignation of public office holders. Hajj Amin tried to pacify the crowd and calmly refused to resign: "Were the country to benefit from my resignation, then the issue would be a simple matter. And if the day comes when my resignation will be of benefit, I will have no difficulty in submitting it."<sup>156</sup> Still, he had to deal with the growing radical tide and the dilemma it posed regarding his relations with the British. The unrest of the October 1933 protests had spread to other Palestinian cities. The Mufti was in India at the time for a General Islamic Congress and was spared from having to confront the situation directly, but the British Government still looked to him to calm the public. He met expectations by persuading the organizers of the protest scheduled for the following January to seek government permission and refrain from clashing with the British.<sup>157</sup> The High Commissioner, Sir Arthur Wauchope, was pleased with Hajj Amin: "The Mufti exercised his great authority over the fellahin to stop them heeding the extremists."<sup>158</sup>

Hajj Amin discouraged open attacks on the colonial government not only because he wanted to protect his status with the British, but also because he was suspicious of radical elements that operated independent of his control. He made every attempt to quiet

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<sup>155</sup> Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinians : The Making of a People*, 101-02.

<sup>156</sup> Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, 32.

<sup>157</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 117.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

*Istiqlal*. He dismissed ‘Awni ‘Abd al-Hadi, the general secretary of *Istiqlal*, from his post as lawyer of the SMC. Also, the Mufti’s supporters revealed that ‘Abd al-Hadi had facilitated Jewish land purchase by giving legal advice in the 1920s.<sup>159</sup> He directed a wider campaign against the *Istiqlal* members, who lacked the organization or political machinery to fight back. By the end of 1933 *Istiqlal*’s impact was greatly diminished.<sup>160</sup>

The Mufti was also suspicious of ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam, though he was less able to quiet the radical shaykh whose operations in Haifa were beyond his reach. In the 1920s, Hajj Amin had denied the shaykh a preaching job with the SMC after Qassam requested that waqf funds be spent on weapons. In 1933 Qassam had one of his followers ask Hajj Amin to start a revolt in the south to match his own in the north. The Mufti reportedly refused.<sup>161</sup> He had too much at stake to challenge the British, far more than Qassam. The Mufti, however, did surreptitiously support any radical action that he could control. He sometimes used *al-Jami‘ah al-‘Arabiyyah* to incite the public against the British. He took no action against *al-Jihad al-Muqaddas*, a radical militia started by Musa Kazim’s son ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni in 1931. Hajj Amin learned about it in 1934, but made no efforts to shut it down. In fact, he secretly took control of the organization himself in 1935.<sup>162</sup>

The Mufti had held the mantle of militant nationalist leader throughout the 1920s, even though this persona was accompanied by relatively little direct action on his part. By the mid-1930s it was clear he no longer held a monopoly on militant nationalism, as

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<sup>159</sup> Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, 66-67.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 131-32; Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, 38.

he found himself challenged by the likes of *Istiqlal* and Qassam. Because of their lesser standing, Hajj Amin's challengers had far more latitude than him when it came to supporting militant rhetoric with radical action. It was the risk of being outflanked that contributed to Hajj Amin's growing extremism and eventual downfall.

In 1934 Musa Kazim al-Husayni passed away, effectively ending the Arab Executive which had become weaker with each passing year. Even though the AE had floundered during his tenure, Musa Kazim had been a steady presence in holding the Husaynis and the opposition together. Also in 1934, Raghīb al-Nashashibi lost his post as mayor of Jerusalem when the Husaynis and Khalidis joined forces to back an opposition candidate. Neither of these developments boded well for Palestinian Arab unity. In 1934-35 competing Palestinian Arab political parties began to form based on the existing factions. The Husaynis formed the Palestine Arab Party. Led by Jamal al-Husayni, the party rejected the Balfour Declaration, called for an end to land sales and immigration, and favored the establishment of an independent Arab state in Palestine.<sup>163</sup> The National Defense Party, led by Raghīb al-Nashashibi, favored an independent Palestine and cooperation with the British. It also instituted ties with King Abdullah of Transjordan and opposed Hajj Amin and pan-Arabism. The Reform Party was led by the Khalidi family. Although its rhetoric was anti-Zionist and pan-Arabist, it was more moderate in practice. Like the National Defense Party, it favored relations with Abdullah. The National Bloc Party was led by 'Abd al-Latif Salah. Based in and around Nablus it favored moderation towards the mandate government.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Hurewitz, *The Struggle for Palestine*, 61.

<sup>164</sup> Elpeleg, *The Grand Mufti: Haj Amin Al-Hussaini, Founder of the Palestinian National Movement*, 35.

### Revolt

Two developments in 1935-36 ended hopes for a peaceful resolution of the situation. First, was the last real attempt to form a legislative council. Sir Arthur Wauchope held talks with Palestinian leaders in July 1935 to discuss the possibility of a legislative council. The informal proposal, which underwent modifications, was for a council of twenty-eight members. It would include five British officials with proportional representation for religious groups: eleven Muslims (three nominated), three Christians (two nominated) and eight Jews (five nominated), as well as a nominee to represent commercial interests. The High Commissioner would retain considerable latitude including the power to veto bills, issue laws and dissolve the council. *Istiqlal* opposed the idea of a council. The five other Palestinian parties formed a common front in November 1935 and accepted the formal offer that the British made the following month. Even as the Arab leadership accepted the offer, their position was moving away from accommodation. In late November they demanded prohibition of land transfer, a complete halt on immigration and a democratic government,<sup>165</sup> conditions that the mandate government was most unlikely to accept. The result was paradoxical: the default Arab line repudiated the essential terms of the mandate, just as the Arab leadership was prepared to cooperate and form a legislative council.

The Christian Arab leadership approved the measure in March 1936. The moderate parties – the National Defense Party and National Bloc – also supported it. The Palestine Arab Party did not reject the plan, though Jamal al-Husayni criticized it, and

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<sup>165</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 194-95.

*Istiqlal* remained opposed.<sup>166</sup> The legislative council never materialized; the proposal was defeated during the British parliamentary debates of 1936. These debates were influenced by pro-Zionist members of parliament and there appeared to be limited understanding of, or support for, the Arab position.<sup>167</sup> An Arab delegation planned to leave for London in April 1936, but it stayed in Palestine to deal with the situation on the ground which had reached a tipping point.

As political efforts were under way, Shaykh Qassam left Haifa with a small group of followers in November 1935. He had begun launching attacks against Jewish settlers as early as 1931, but at this point he wanted to incite a larger rebellion.<sup>168</sup> British police suspected Qassam of involvement in the recent murder of a Jewish settler and surrounded him and his followers in the village of Shaykh Zayd. Qassam and three others were killed in a gun battle on November 20.<sup>169</sup> His death transformed him into a national martyr; his funeral in Haifa drew over 3,000 mourners and led to “a strong wave of Arab patriotic emotion.”<sup>170</sup>

Qassam’s death was a major catalyst for the Palestinian Arab Revolt and it was his followers that sparked the first stage of the rebellion. On 15 April 1936, *Ikhwan al-Qassam* killed two Jews in an ambush. Haganah, the Jewish militia, responded by killing two Palestinians. On April 19 the *Istiqlal* leaders declared a general strike. The other Arab leaders quickly formed the Arab Higher Committee (AHC) with Hajj Amin al-

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>167</sup> Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 132; Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 171-72, 96.

<sup>168</sup> Swedenburg, "The Role of the Palestinian Peasantry in the Great Revolt (1936-1939)," 190.

<sup>169</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 216-17; Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, Library of Modern Middle East Studies (London ; New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), 19.

<sup>170</sup> Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Jewish Problems in Palestine and Europe. United Nations General Assembly. Special Committee on Palestine, *A Survey of Palestine*, 33.

Husayni as president. The Committee called for an end to immigration and land transfer, and the establishment of a national government with a representative council.<sup>171</sup> The AHC included all the major political parties: two members of *Istiqlal*, ‘Awni ‘Abd al-Hadi (secretary) and Ahmad Hilmi Pasha, the president of the Arab Bank (treasurer); Raghib al-Nashashibi and Ya‘qub al-Farraj (National Defense Party); Jamal al-Husayni and Alfred Rock (Palestine Arab Party); Dr. Husayn Fakhri (Reform Party); ‘Abd al-Latif Salah (National Bloc) and Ya‘qub al-Ghusayn (Youth Congress).<sup>172</sup> The AHC members were still suspicious of each other, though they were united in their desire to maintain control of the national movement.

The general strike had widespread public support. The Jaffa port workers, the Arab Chamber of Commerce, and six municipal councils joined the strike. Arab officials working for the mandate government did not participate, although they pledged a tenth of their salaries. National committees were set up throughout Palestine and became food distribution centers for the strikers, while women’s committees provided relief to poorer families.<sup>173</sup>

Although the AHC provided direction in this first stage, the revolt had strong grassroots support that was largely independent of the traditional elite leadership. In the countryside, recruitment, command, planning and proceeded on a piecemeal basis. Fighters were recruited by family or clan leaders and village elders – sometimes as volunteers and other times as conscripts. Peasant families contributed food, shelter, and their young men to the cause. Rebel guerilla bands (*fasa’il*) attacked British civil

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<sup>171</sup> Samih K. Farsoun and Christina E. Zacharia, *Palestine and the Palestinians* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), 106.

<sup>172</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 115-16.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-18.



servants and Jews, often operating independently of any larger national command structure. Local forces knew the terrain and could attack quickly and unexpectedly and they could also evade British detection by blending into the villages.<sup>174</sup> By the summer, permanent bands of fifty to seventy men formed full-time resistance forces under regional commanders. The most distinguished of these was ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, the rebel commander in the Jerusalem area.<sup>175</sup> However, there were still disputes between rebel commanders and their respective local forces. This was complicated by the entry of outside Arab fighters like Fawzi al-Qawuqji. Born in Beirut and recently discharged from the Iraqi army, Qawuqji was already a seasoned veteran<sup>176</sup> when he entered Palestine in late August 1936 and declared himself commander of the General Arab Revolt in Southern Syria.<sup>177</sup> Qawuqji’s choice of title – and the fact that his force of two hundred were Syrians, Iraqis and Transjordanians, rather than Palestinians – indicated that Palestine was becoming an Arab issue as opposed to a strictly Palestinian one.

In the first six months of the revolt 80 Jews and 197 Arabs were killed, as well as 38 British.<sup>178</sup> The strike had not been as effective as the Arab leadership had hoped. Many Arabs that had worked for Jewish companies were simply replaced by Jewish laborers and in this sense the strike consolidated the Jewish position. Thousands of Palestinians had been arrested and the British had not yielded to their demands. A new

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<sup>174</sup> Farsoun and Zacharia, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, 106.

<sup>175</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 185.

<sup>176</sup> Qawuqji had served with distinction in the Ottoman army in World War I. After the French occupation of Syria he worked as an intelligence officer receiving a *legion d'honneur* for his service. He switched sides yet again by leading the ‘Great Syrian Revolt’ against the French in 1925. He escaped to the Hijaz and became a military adviser to King Ibn Saud. Prior to entering Palestine he had served in the Iraqi army. Tom Bowden, "The Politics of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine 1936-39," *Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 2 (1975): 156.

<sup>177</sup> Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinians : The Making of a People*, 109-10.

<sup>178</sup> Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 239.

Jewish immigration quota was announced on May 18. It was reduced from previous levels, though it was not the full stoppage that the AHC had demanded. The AHC leaders did not want to appear weak by accommodating the British, but they also did not want to continue the strike, which was costly to the Arab population. There was also concern about the effect that the strike would have on the approaching citrus harvest. They found a way out in October when the Arab leaders from other countries persuaded the Committee to call off the strike by brokering a deal with British government. By agreeing to their request the AHC was able to end the strike by cooperating with other Arab leaders rather than appearing to surrender to the British authorities.

In November, a Royal Commission headed by Lord Peel began an investigation into the causes of the riots. The Zionists in Palestine cooperated fully with the commission. They demanded unlimited immigration and land transfer. The Palestinians initially boycotted the commission but the Mufti later testified before it, again at the behest of outside Arab leaders. His position was unchanged. He demanded an independent Arab state in Palestine and an end to Jewish immigration.

The Peel Report, published in July 1937, was a radical departure from previous British policy. Citing irreconcilable differences between Arabs and Jews, it recommended that Palestine be partitioned into two separate states. The Jewish state would include the northern region of Galilee, including Acre, Haifa, and Nazareth and the Jezreel Plain to the south, as well as the coastal plain from the north of Acre to the south of Jaffa. There would be an elliptical strip of land forming a corridor from Jaffa westwards to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, which would remain under British control. The Arabs were granted the remainder of the area, including the Nablus and Hebron regions, and from the Negev

desert, south to the Gulf of Aqaba (see Figure 2). The commission recommended that the Arab state be placed under the overall control of Transjordan. The Zionists accepted the plan publicly but they were clearly displeased with the proposal. The AHC rejected the plan entirely.

At this time some Zionists favored a transfer program under which large numbers of Arabs would be relocated to areas outside Palestine, thereby facilitating the creation of Jewish national home. This was one possible course of action that was considered as part of the Zionist response to the Peel plan. In November 1937, months after the Peel Report was published, the Zionist Executive established a Transfer Committee. The chair of the committee, Yosef Weitz, called for the transfer of much of the rural Arab population either to the Arab state (as proposed by the partition plan) or possibly to Transjordan, Syria or Iraq.

The goal was to open up land for Zionist settlement. The plan lost its momentum as the British retreated from the partition plan and moved towards the idea of a bi-national state.<sup>179</sup> This demonstrates a clear difference in the diplomatic mentalities of the two sides. Even though the Zionist leadership was displeased with the plan, they quickly considered alternative strategies to maximize their position. The Arab leadership maintained its same strategy even as its position grew weaker.

The second phase of the revolt began with assassination of Lewis Andrews, the Acting District Commissioner of Galilee on September 26. British officials immediately disbanded the AHC. Over 200 Palestinians were arrested, including members of the AHC, SMC and national committees. Many members of the AHC managed to evade the

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<sup>179</sup> Peter Sluglett, 'Preface' to Abbas Shibliak, *Iraqi Jews: A History of Mass Exodus* (London: Saqi Books, 2005), 19-21.



Figure 2. The Peel Commission Partition Plan, 1937. From *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 2nd ed.* by Mark Tessler. Copyright © 2009 University of Indiana Press. Used by permission of the publisher.

British authorities. Hajj Amin al-Husayni escaped to Lebanon, Jamal al-Husayni to Syria. ‘Awni ‘Abd al-Hadi, ‘Izzat Darwaza, Alfred Rock and ‘Abd al-Latif Salah were all traveling abroad on diplomatic missions at the time and they avoided prosecution by not returning.<sup>180</sup>

With many of the established leaders forced into exile, the leadership of the revolt shifted to the peasants. The rebels obtained arms by seizing police stations. They destroyed telephone and railroad lines, and set up various institutions to organize the resistance. The Higher Council of Command was formed in 1938. The rebels also created a system of courts and systems for supplies, taxation and arms and some rebel leaders established new laws and regulations.<sup>181</sup> They succeeded in taking control of Jaffa for several months and controlled Nablus, Hebron, Bethlehem and Ramallah at the peak of the revolt in 1938.<sup>182</sup> By September ‘the situation was such that civil administration and control of the countryside was, to all practical purposes, nonexistent.’<sup>183</sup>

Although the British lost control of the countryside and some cities and towns, the Palestinian resistance was devoid of any unified leadership at the end of 1937 and for much of 1938. Upstart rebel institutions did not amount to effective central command, and the regional guerilla leaders were as factionalized as the elites of the AHC. ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Hajj Muhammad, the nominal commander-in-chief, led a band of 50 rebels in military operations around the Nablus-Jenin region, but this was only a small fraction of the roughly 2,000 full-time Arab guerillas operating in Palestine at the time. He tried to

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<sup>180</sup> Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinians : The Making of a People*, 106; Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 123.

<sup>181</sup> Farsoun and Zacharia, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, 107.

<sup>182</sup> Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinians : The Making of a People*, 107.

<sup>183</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 238.

co-opt other rebel leaders by controlling arms distribution and rebel military courts.<sup>184</sup> ‘Arif ‘Abd al-Razzaq controlled the rebel effort in Tulkarm and Ramallah and was bitterly opposed to al-Hajj Muhammad. ‘Abd al-Razzaq became known as a ruthless hit man for Hajj Amin al-Husayni, usually targeting Palestinians who were deemed too moderate. ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, who had fled at the end of the general strike, returned to Palestine in the spring of 1938. By August he controlled the revolt in the Hebron and Jerusalem areas.<sup>185</sup> These commanders and other rebel leaders were distrustful of each other and lacking in any overall coordination or common vision.

The Mufti’s rejection of the partition plan, his dismissal from the SMC, and his subsequent exile had increased his popularity with peasants and rebels throughout Palestine. He tried to use his influence to subordinate the rebel groups to a central command. He attempted to do this with the Central Committee for National Jihad, a Damascus-based group set up by ‘Izzat Darwaza, but this was difficult to do from abroad. Fawzi al-Qawuqji, who had fled in the fall of 1936, returned in the spring of 1938. The Central Committee reached out to him as a potential supreme commander. He refused the position but it is unlikely that the rebels would have submitted to a foreign commander anyway.<sup>186</sup> Hajj Amin did keep up attacks on his rivals through his operatives in Palestine. In November 1938 ‘Abd al-Razzaq’s men assassinated Hasan Sidqi al-Dajani, a Nashashibi supporter.<sup>187</sup> Raghib al-Nashashibi himself moved to Cairo to avoid a similar fate. Fakhri al-Nashashibi, meanwhile, spent much of 1938 organizing counter-

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<sup>184</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 223-24.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 224-25.

<sup>186</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 243-44.

<sup>187</sup> Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939 : The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*, 225.

rebel bands. The revolt finally subsided in early 1939, but not before 20,000 British troops had been dispatched to restore order.

The Arab Revolt was a watershed in the history of the Palestinian national movement and one that encapsulates many facets of the history of the Palestine mandate. One of these was the culmination of a trend that had been years in the making – the peasantry acting independently of the notable leadership. During the revolt the peasantry expressed its frustration with the ruling class and carried out many of its operations without the direction of the traditional elites. This was the case not only in the second stage of the rebellion but in many ways from the very beginning. In October 1936, Wauchope wrote that the general strike had begun “independently and spontaneously in various places by various committees” on April 20-21. The AHC had formed in response to other groups, calling for the strike four days later on April 25.<sup>188</sup> Raghīb al-Nashashībī also recognized the changing scenario. On May 5, 1936 he said “the tension in the country was great and the attitude of the leaders was dictated by the pressure brought to bear upon them by the nation. The people...were ruling the leaders and not the leaders ruling the people”.<sup>189</sup> Nashashībī may have been trying to deny culpability and maintain his moderate position with the British; even so, his statement speaks volumes about the changes underway in Palestinian Arab society. The events of the Arab Revolt demonstrated the lower classes’ frustration with the ruling elites, particularly moderates like the Nashashībīs and their allies. Once the AHC was outlawed in 1937, the peasants unmistakably became the center of the resistance. Sir Harold MacMichael, who assumed the office in March 1938, observed that, “Something like a social revolution on a small

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<sup>188</sup> Bowden, “The Politics of the Arab Rebellion in Palestine 1936-39,” 169.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

scale is beginning. The influence of the landlord-politician is on the wane.”<sup>190</sup> Subsequent research seems to support MacMichael’s observation. Based on an empirical study of rebel officeholders, Porath writes, “The conclusion is clear: the Revolt was carried out mainly by Muslim villagers of the lower strata, the participation of urban, educated or notable families being rather slight.”<sup>191</sup>

The events of the revolt and the findings of the Peel Report confirmed what had long been the case; that the national aspirations of Jews and Arabs were simply incompatible, as both had visions for the future of Palestine that ran counter to each other. By this time it was also clear that some of the divisions within Palestinian Arab society were almost equally irreconcilable, and that the traditional hierarchy and power structure that supported the leadership had failed to advance the national cause. Yet there was no real possibility of a political realignment within Palestinian society. While there was clear antipathy between the rural rebel groups and the *a‘yan* and other urban Arabs, there was nothing like an elected national assembly that could be used for the reallocation of power. Even if there was, the majority of rebel bands lacked the resources, knowledge and political savvy which would be needed to petition the British. In one way or another, the existing leaders had exhausted their political capital. The Mufti had renewed his militant nationalist credentials in the eyes of many Palestinians, but this came at a high cost. In addition to geographical displacement resulting from his forced exile, Hajj Amin no longer had the institutional prestige and financial support that the Supreme Muslim Council had afforded him. He also had accumulated many enemies by this point. Raghib al-Nashashibi was on better terms with the British authorities, though his moderate

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<sup>190</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 269.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.



political views were out of step with the radical shifts in Palestinian opinion. The Mufti's loyalists and many other Palestinians regarded al-Nashashibi as a collaborator. He was certainly moderate and more willing to compromise, as he had privately favored partition in the hope that he would rule Arab Palestine under Transjordan.

### Intervention by the Arab States

For all their differences, the Palestinian leaders all had begun looking to the surrounding Arab countries for a political solution which they themselves had been unable to deliver. The moderate wing of the AHC, Nashashibi's National Defense Party and the National Bloc Party, had favored closer relations with Abdullah before the outbreak of the revolt. On the other end of the spectrum, *Istiqlal* called for a pan-Arab solution to the Palestinian predicament. The Peel Report's recommendation for a Palestinian Arab state under Jordanian control indicates that the British were also looking to the other Arab nations for a solution. Thus the Palestinian national leadership and the mandate government both began to seek greater Arab involvement for help in mediating the situation. The lack of a viable alternative leadership from within Palestinian society made this a logical choice.

Arab kings from Iraq, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen were instrumental in reaching a deal to end to the general strike in the fall of 1936. It was they who had petitioned the AHC on behalf of the British authorities and it was their participation which let the Committee appear to be heeding the call of other Arabs rather than capitulating to British pressure. But their brokering of a truce did not necessarily mean moderation or acceptance of British ideas. For the most part, Arab leaders supported the

Palestinian leadership in its rejection of British proposals. In August 1937, a conference of four hundred Arab delegates met at Bludan in Syria and issued a unanimous rejection of the Peel Commission plan. This event did not escape the attention of the British Foreign Office.<sup>192</sup> The Arab leaders were also invited to the 1939 London conference that resulted in the British issuing a new White Paper. Palestinians participated (e.g. Jamal al-Husayni and 'Awni 'Abd al-Hadi; Hajj Amin was banned), though the British hoped that the Egyptian, Iraqi, and Saudi delegates would persuade the Palestinians to accept a compromise.<sup>193</sup> The British certainly wanted to find a solution to the Palestine issue, but they were also beginning to view Palestine through the prism of regional politics. Other Arab states were clearly taking an interest in the situation and the British began to see the Palestine issue as a vehicle for preserving their standing in the region. This was even more true after the outbreak of World War II.

The British support for a greater Arab role was a key element in reshaping the political agenda surrounding the Palestinian national movement, but the British were not the prime motivators in this process. It was the Palestinian leaders who appealed to the Arab leaders for assistance and tried to win support from the general public in other Arab countries. After the disbanding of the AHC, some Palestinian notables sent messages to the Iraqi, Egyptian, and Saudi kings asking them to 'rescue the Arabs of Palestine'. Hajj Amin sent two representatives to Egypt, where they publicized the Palestinian cause and contacted government officials.<sup>194</sup> The exile of many Palestinian leaders further

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<sup>192</sup> Nicholas Bethell, *The Palestine Triangle: The Struggle Between the British, the Jews and the Arabs 1935-48* (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1979), 32-34.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>194</sup> Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, 274-75.

necessitated the support of other Arab regimes, as they often took refuge in neighboring Arab countries.

In general, the Palestinian cause gained support in surrounding countries. In Egypt, the Higher Committee for the Relief of Palestine Victims was organized between 1936 and 1939 with the support of leaders from the Young Men's Muslim Association, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Liberal Constitutional Party. In July 1936 the Egyptian Parliament passed resolutions supporting the "Palestinian nation" and the Egyptian Prime Minister voiced his concerns to the British government.<sup>195</sup> In Iraq, the Iraqi Palestine Defense Committee was established to lead a propaganda campaign. This committee had persuaded Fawzi al-Qawuqji to resign his commission in the Iraqi army to fight in Palestine and the Iraqi government provided rifles and transportation for him and his troops.<sup>196</sup>

The issue of Palestine also featured prominently at regional conferences. The Inter-Parliamentary Arab Congress was held on 7 October 1938 in Cairo, a week after the British outlawed the AHC. Organized by the Egyptian Palestine Defense Parliamentary Committee, the conference attracted over sixty members of parliament from Egypt, Syria and Iraq. This pattern continued after the Palestinian Revolt ended. The Alexandria Protocol, a resolution passed at a 1944 meeting of Arab leaders, called for the foundation of a league of independent Arab states. It also stated "that Palestine constitutes an important part of the Arab world and that the rights of Arabs [in Palestine] cannot be

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<sup>195</sup> Yehoshua Porath, *In Search of Arab Unity, 1930-1945* (London, England ; Totowa, N.J.: Cass, 1986), 162-63.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 164. The Iraqi Prime Minister, Yasin al-Hashimi, tried to stop Qawuqji's forces when he realized that his support might alienate the British, but by that time the troops had already entered Palestine.

touched without prejudice to the peace and stability of the Arab world.”<sup>197</sup> Some historians believe the events in Palestine in the late 1930s were “perhaps the single most important factor which contributed to the growth of pan-Arab ideology, to the feeling of solidarity among the Arab peoples and to the attempt at shaping a unified general Arab position and policy.”<sup>198</sup> Pan-Arab or Arab nationalist ideology was shaped by series of events in many countries and the rise of this political sentiment is not solely attributable to the Palestinian Arab Revolt. However, the Palestinian issue was definitely becoming a focal point in regard to a unified Arab policy and for solidarity among Arabs across the Middle East.

What did this all mean for the Palestinian national movement and how did it affect the national leadership? Here it is useful to return to Gellner’s observation of nationalism as a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent. For over fifteen years there had been little question as to what political and national units were under consideration. With the end of the Faisal era and the beginning of British administration in Palestine, the Arabs of Palestine were administered as one political unit. The traditional leadership, mostly the Jerusalem *a‘yan*, sought greater legitimacy and power within the political and geographical confines of the mandate. The matter of collective identity among the population – its identification as a national unit – had largely been determined by contemporary political realities. There were certainly persisting village, clan and family alliances, but to some degree at least, Palestinian Arabs

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<sup>197</sup> Hurewitz, *The Struggle for Palestine*, 192. Also cited in Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 178.

<sup>198</sup> Porath, *In Search of Arab Unity, 1930-1945*, 162. Roger Owen cites the part about pan-Arab ideology. Roger Owen, *State, Power, and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1992), 59.

developed a national identity that was distinct from that of other Arabs because they were being administered as one political unit. The *Istiqlal* leaders and Qassam had used pan-Arabism and Islamism respectively in order to frame the political goals of the national movement. Although these were extra-territorial sources of identity, the political focus of their activity was still inside of Palestine and concerned with Palestinian national issues such as Jewish immigration, land purchase, and dealing with the mandate government.

The increase in outside Arab involvement was the beginning of a process in which the Palestinian Arab leadership would lose control of the national agenda. For the next thirty years, the Palestinian leaders were supplanted by outside Arab leaders as the main dynamos of the national movement. This process accelerated after the partition of Palestine in 1947 and the subsequent establishment of Israel in 1948. This was not entirely unlike the situation after World War I, when Faisal represented the Palestinians before the Allies in Paris. However, there was a critical difference. In 1918 the political and national units in question were somewhat amorphous. The mandates had put some distance between the national experiences of the peoples in different Arab countries and the Palestine mandate had a unique set of political problems different from that of the others. The assistance of the Arab leaders was needed and sought after by Palestinian leaders, but it complicated the task of the national leadership because it added other parties to a contentious situation that was already marred by too many interests that could not agree on what was to be done. There were divisions between Palestinian leaders, and between the *a'yan* and the *fellahin*. There were also differences between British officials and Zionist leaders, and though not discussed here, there were multiple factions within each of these groups. Decision-making and policy was divided between Palestine and

London for both groups. A similar divide was taking place on the Arab side, though the consequences of diluting the Palestinian national leadership were far more damaging than it was for the British and Zionist sides. The continuation of the existing mandate policy had corrosive and ultimately irreversible effects on the Arab position in Palestine. Arab involvement, though badly needed, added to the plurality of voices on the Palestinian side and it made it even harder to form a united national front.

The conduct of the traditional leaders had hardly been exemplary. With the exception of the strike, they had generally failed to cooperate amongst themselves, allowing personal feuds to override the possible emergence of a unified national voice. But at least they had been native residents of Palestine with a clear stake in the future of the land. Arab empathy for the Palestinians was genuine and their financial, military, and political support was borne out of legitimate concern for their fellow Arabs. Arab involvement resulted in an increase in the range of political options available. This was welcome and perhaps necessary, as Palestinian society was shorn of better options, but it did not promote the reemergence of what was most needed – a unified national leadership.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In the late Ottoman era, Arab life in Palestine had been characterized by a fairly well-defined social and political hierarchy. This era was marked by the presence of the *a'yan* as a powerful class of urban notables who acquired vast tracts of land that were usually worked by the *fellahin*. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to an increase in the possible sources of national identification for the Arabs of Palestine, and various political options for the future of the territory.

At the end of World War I, the Arab of Palestine derived their primary identity from a variety of sources: clan, village, family and religion. There was no strong or widespread sentiment of Palestinian nationalism and the political options for the future of the region were not strictly limited to the idea of a Palestinian entity. This possibility competed with the idea of including Palestine as a province of a larger independent Arab state based in Damascus. In the brief span between the end of the war and the beginning of the British Mandate, the future of Palestine was influenced by British and French imperial designs, the Zionist agenda, and various Arab leaders, some of whom were local and others who resided outside of the area. Palestine was proposed either for inclusion as the southern province of Greater Syria or as its own entity under British supervision.

The inception of the British Mandate for Palestine rendered the territory into a single political unit and led to the creation of specifically Palestinian institutions, such as the AE and SMC. The Palestinian leadership consisted mostly of the same Arab leaders of the late Ottoman era – the Jerusalem *a‘yan* and their families. The Palestinian leaders were often at odds with each other and unsuccessful in establishing an Arab representative council.

There were also national experiences that were unique to the Palestinians. Most notable was the encountering of Jewish immigration and experiencing the effects of Jewish land purchases. 1929 was the year of Arab-Jewish riots at Jerusalem’s Western Wall. The riots were not the first civil disturbances in Palestine, though as the British investigations found, they indicated systemic problems in the situation of the Palestinian Arab population – anger and resentment over Jewish land purchase and immigration, and frustrated national aspirations.

The British conclusions were essentially correct. From 1920 through 1935, Palestinian Arab society was riddled with divisions among the ruling class, the *a‘yan*, and by socioeconomic changes that affected the lower classes. These changes were closely linked to the persistence of Jewish immigration and land purchase, which further exacerbated the longstanding social inequalities in Arab society. The Palestinian Arab Revolt of the late 1930s was the culmination of lower class frustration with the ruling elites. The disenchanted *fellahin* and other rebels took an active role in the uprising, acting independently of the *a‘yan*. Also during this time, advocacy of the Palestinian issue shifted from the local Arab leaders to those of the neighboring Arab countries in a scenario somewhat similar to that of twenty years earlier.



The decade after the Western Wall riots was a tumultuous one. In many ways the situation did not change. Jewish land purchase and immigration were still the main issues affecting the Palestinian people and the leading families were still deeply divided. The absence of any solution to the issue of Jewish land acquisition was a major reason for the fragmentation of the Palestinian national movement. It was an issue that concerned virtually all Palestinian Arabs, and opposition to land transfer was widespread amongst the people. However, it did not affect all social classes in the same way. Jewish land purchases aggravated an already dysfunctional land system and deepened existing schisms in Arab society. Small landowners sold to escape debt. Large landowners mostly profited from land sales, though their decision to sell led to the eviction of tenant farmers and a created a class of landless Arabs. Thus, while Arab concern over land purchases contributed to the rise of a popular national consciousness, concerted action to stop land purchases was virtually impossible and actually caused divisions within the national movement. Individual motives, the desire for profit and plain desperation combined to undermine the collective national interest.

The land issue was troubling, though at least it was somewhat quantifiable in that it dealt with ownership of physical space. A more ambiguous issue was the question of just what political and national units were being considered. The idea of nationalism was a relatively new concept in the Middle East. At the dawn of the mandate the Arabs of Palestine derived their identities from a variety of sources including religion, village, family and clan. For many Arabs, particularly the less educated rural dwellers, their idea of loyalty or allegiance often did not extend beyond the village in which they were raised. The urban notable families understood the politics of nationalism somewhat better, though

their efforts often focused on local power struggles rather than national progress. They frequently demonstrated their antipathy for one another and their disregard for the lower classes, rather than their unanimity as fellow Palestinians. Beside the more limited notions of collective identity, Palestinian nationalism and identity was competing with the idea of a greater Arab identity that linked the Palestinians to the surrounding territories. This notion of all Arabs as constituting a national entity gained popularity and influence in political discussion; almost immediately after World War I the idea of including Palestine as part of a southern Syrian province garnered considerable support. This idea receded with the inauguration of the mandate. Later some groups began to advocate a greater Arab political solution to the Palestinian problem. *Istiqlal*, for example, was a political organization that cast the Palestinian issue as a pan-Arab one. The rise of pan-Arabism in the 1930s did not crystallize around support for one potentially viable outside Arab leader. For the Palestinians of the 1930s there was no political equivalent of Faisal. Rather, pan-Arabism revolved around a common identification as Arabs and the Palestinians' growing dependence on the other Arab states. Indeed, during the revolt Palestinians found financial, military, and diplomatic support from other Arab leaders and their constituencies. For their part, the Arab leaders rallied in support of the Palestinians, while beginning to replace them as the main political advocates of the Palestinian cause. Almost simultaneously, guerilla bands from the countryside were laying siege to Palestinian cities, targeting moderate Arabs, and warring with rebels from other villages. As a result, Palestinian nationalism was competing with both narrower and broader options for primary identification and loyalty.

One reason for the different notions of national identity was because the options that were available came from a political framework that was externally imposed. The possibility of a single unified Arab state was the main incentive that the British had used to recruit Sharif Husayn of Mecca to lead an Arab Revolt against the Turks and the same idea was behind their support of Faisal's short-lived government in Syria. The victorious Allied powers looked to Faisal as spokesman for the Palestinian Arabs and the Palestinians petitioned Faisal accordingly. A similar pattern recurred later on when the Arab states intervened to end the Palestinian Revolt. The outside Arab role was the result of a combination of Western powers appealing to the Arab states and Palestinians requesting the help of other Arab leaders. While pan-Arab sentiment remained, the national experiences of the Palestinians and other Arab peoples had diverged considerably by this point. Other Arab states could assist the Palestinians, but it was the Palestinians alone who would be adversely affected by the continued absence of a political solution, and of a viable political leadership to act on their behalf.

A great deal has changed in the Palestine issue since 1939. Palestine has not been a unified political territory for more than sixty years. Britain has long been replaced by the United States as the main Western power in Arab-Israeli relations. Pan-Arab sentiment lost much of its support after the crushing defeat of 1967. Today there is little ambiguity over Palestinian national identity. Palestinians who have been living in exile for generations still identify strongly with their homeland. The same is true of their children, though many of them have never visited the region. Yet there are still striking similarities between the issues that confronted the early national movement and the ones that it faces today.

Currently, the Palestinian leadership is deeply divided. Fatah has been at the forefront of the national movement for decades, but it has problems. To some observers, the party is symbolic of failed leadership, corruption, and overeagerness to comply with US demands. Moreover, its hold on the national movement has slipped in recent years. Fatah had been the premiere party since it took control of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1969, but it finished second to rival Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian general elections. After nearly two decades on the militant fringe of Palestinian politics, Hamas staked its claim to the leadership of the national movement with a victory in the 2006 elections. It now controls the Gaza Strip, but to some extent, the organization finds itself caught between its militant ideology and the practical needs of governing.

The situation of these groups is reminiscent of that which frustrated the Palestinian leadership in the first two decades of the mandate. Both are bound by limits in their range of political options, with a possible backlash if they exceed those limits. Mahmoud Abbas, Fatah's leader, is currently president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the provisional Palestinian government. If he compromises with the US and Israel, he may come under political attack from Hamas. If he does not, he will remain a leader with nothing to show for his efforts. If Hamas moderates its tone it risks an internal divide between its militant and more pragmatic members, and it might also be challenged by more radical fringe groups. Yet if it continues in its refusal to recognize Israel, Hamas will remain isolated from the peace process. The existing status quo makes it difficult for either group to make bold changes in their political positions without significant risk to their stakes in the national movement. These stakes have little value, however, if there is no substantive progress towards a peace agreement. Supremacy over the rival party is

worth little if it comes at the cost of the ultimate national goal of a sovereign Palestinian state.

There is also some similarity between the current situation and that of the mandate era in regard to the key issues of land and population. As was the case then, the absence of an agreement that addresses these areas contributes to the erosion of the Palestinian position. The two main issues of the mandate were immigration and land purchase. The former shifted the demographics of the population in Palestine away from the Arab majority, while the latter reduced the amount of land under Arab control. Now a similar struggle is taking place in the West Bank, where construction of Jewish settlements has continued since 1967. In the process, Palestinian land has been expropriated, settlements have been built, and settlers have taken up residence in the area. Beginning in 1993 the Oslo peace process was supposed to lead to a final peace agreement. It has not led to a final agreement and in the meantime the confiscation of land and construction of settlements has continued largely unabated.

The issues confronting the Palestinian national leadership in 1920 were similar to those that it faced in 1937. In essence, the issues were the same, the situation much worse. History is repeating itself for the Palestinians. The issues are much the same today as they were in 1993, but the task of resolving them is ever more difficult. There are hundreds of thousands of Israelis living in settlements in the West Bank. The settlements are a profound obstacle to any proposals for a future Palestinian state. As the number of settlers increases through natural population growth and new migration, it becomes harder to consider creating a unified Palestinian state. The possibility of

dismantling the settlements has already proven to be an extremely contentious issue in Israeli politics, and their continued growth further complicates the problem.

During the mandate the Zionists faced a formidable struggle. They had to establish “facts on the ground” by creating a physical presence that made the Jewish national home a reality. The aspirations of Zionism culminated in the establishment of Israel in 1948. The Jewish state has survived and generally prospered for over sixty years despite hostile and tense relations with its Arab neighbors. Today, the facts on the ground are changing once again and the fate of the Palestinians is being threatened. Gaining control of the land and establishing a demographic presence in Palestine was a process that enabled the realization of Zionist goals. The construction of settlements is not necessary for the creation of a Jewish national home, because a Jewish state already exists in Palestine. The process that led to the fulfillment of one national people is threatening the future of another.

This thesis has argued for a deeper understanding of the early history of the Palestinian national movement. The Palestinian Arab leaders were generally uncooperative with the mandate government and ultimately unsuccessful in dealing with the political obstacles they faced. In addition, there were various social and economic changes in Arab society which complicated the task at hand. There were reasons that they chose not to cooperate, but there was no reward for the lack of a political solution. It is important to understand why the national movement developed as it did and the nature of the obstacles it experienced. The same is true today. There are reasons that the Palestinian leadership does not compromise on certain points, but there is no incentive for presiding over an untenable situation. Understanding the nature of the issues that confront the

Palestinian national movement and how those issues affect its decision-making is essential for reaching a lasting peace.

## APPENDIX

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

al-Dajani, ‘Arif (1856-1930) – Mayor of Jerusalem during World War I. Founding member of the Muslim-Christian Association in Jerusalem. Elected the first vice-president of the Arab Executive in 1920.

Darwaza, Muhammad ‘Izzat (1889-1985) - Influential member of the Arab Club after World War I. Helped establish the *Istiqlal* Party in 1932.

Faisal, ibn Husayn (1883-1933) - Son of the Sharif. Part of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. Main Arab representative to the European powers after World War I. Later served as King of Iraq (1921-33).

al-Ghusayn, Ya‘qub (1899-1947) – Leader of the National Congress of Arab Youth. Member of the Arab Higher Committee.

‘Abd al-Hadi, Awni (1889-1970) – Member of the Arab Executive in the 1920s and early 1930s. Member of *Istiqlal* and the Arab Higher Committee.

Husayn, ibn ‘Ali (1853-1931) – Sharif of Mecca. Ruler of the Hijaz. Launched the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman army in 1916.

al-Husayni, ‘Abd al-Qadir (1908-1948) – Son of Musa Kazim al-Husayni. Founded *Munazzamat al-Jihad al-Muqaddas* (Organization for the Holy Struggle). Guerilla commander in the Jerusalem area during the Palestinian Arab Revolt.

al-Husayni, al-Hajj Amin (1895-1974) – President of the Supreme Muslim Council and Grand Mufti of Jerusalem (1921-37). Elected as President of the Arab Club in 1918 and President of the Arab Higher Committee in 1936.

al-Husayni, Jamal (1892-1982) – Served as secretary of the Arab Executive and Supreme Muslim Council during the British mandate. President of the Palestine Arab Party. Member of the Arab Higher Committee.



al-Husayni, Musa Kazim (1850?-1934) – Served in various government positions in the Ottoman Empire from 1892 to 1913. Mayor of Jerusalem (1918-20). President of the Arab Executive (1920-34). Led several Arab delegations to London between 1921 and 1930.

MacMichael, Sir Harold (1882-1969) – British High Commissioner of Palestine (1938-44).

McMahon, Sir Henry (1862-1949) – British High Commissioner of Egypt (1915-17). Exchanged a series of letters with Sharif Husayn concerning the future of the Middle East.

al-Nashashibi, Raghib (1883-1951) – Led the opposition movement to the Husayni family. Mayor of Jerusalem (1920-34). Founded the National Defense Party in 1934. Member of the Arab Higher Committee.

al-Nashashibi, Fakhrri (1899-1941) – Nephew of Raghib al-Nashashibi. Key member of the opposition movement. Member in the Literary Society and later the National Defense Party.

al-Qassam, 'Izz al-Din (1880?-1935) – Radical shaykh based in Haifa. Called for armed resistance to the mandate. Died in a confrontation with British police. His followers formed the Qassam Brotherhood.

Rock, Alfred (1885-1956) – Member of the Palestine Arab Party and the Arab Higher Committee.

Samuel, Sir Herbert (1870-1963) – British High Commissioner of Palestine (1920-25).

Wauchope, Sir Arthur (1874-1937) – British High Commissioner of Palestine (1931-38).

Weizmann, Chaim (1874-1952) – Two-time President of the World Zionist Organization (1920-32, 1935-46).

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